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FRONT COVER:

Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance

BACK COVER:

John and the Missus



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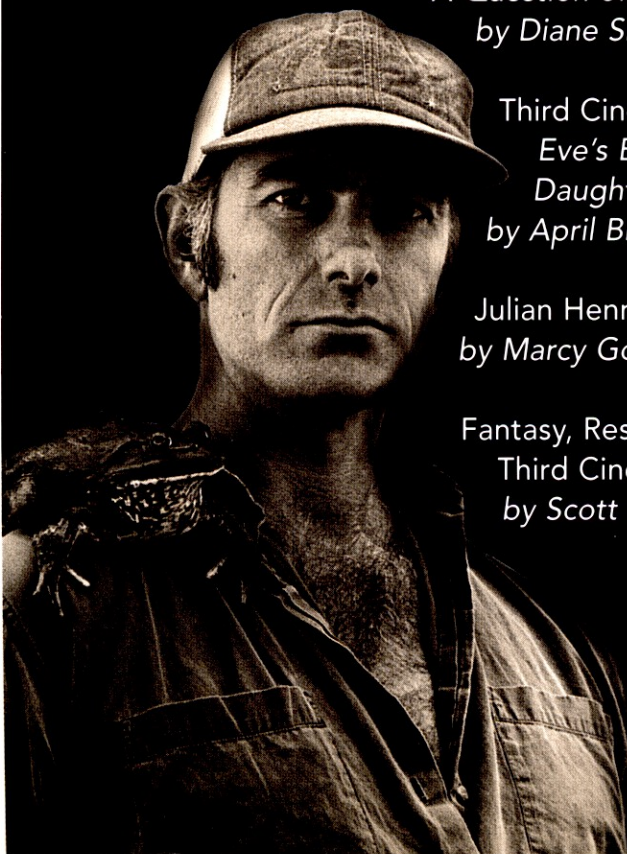
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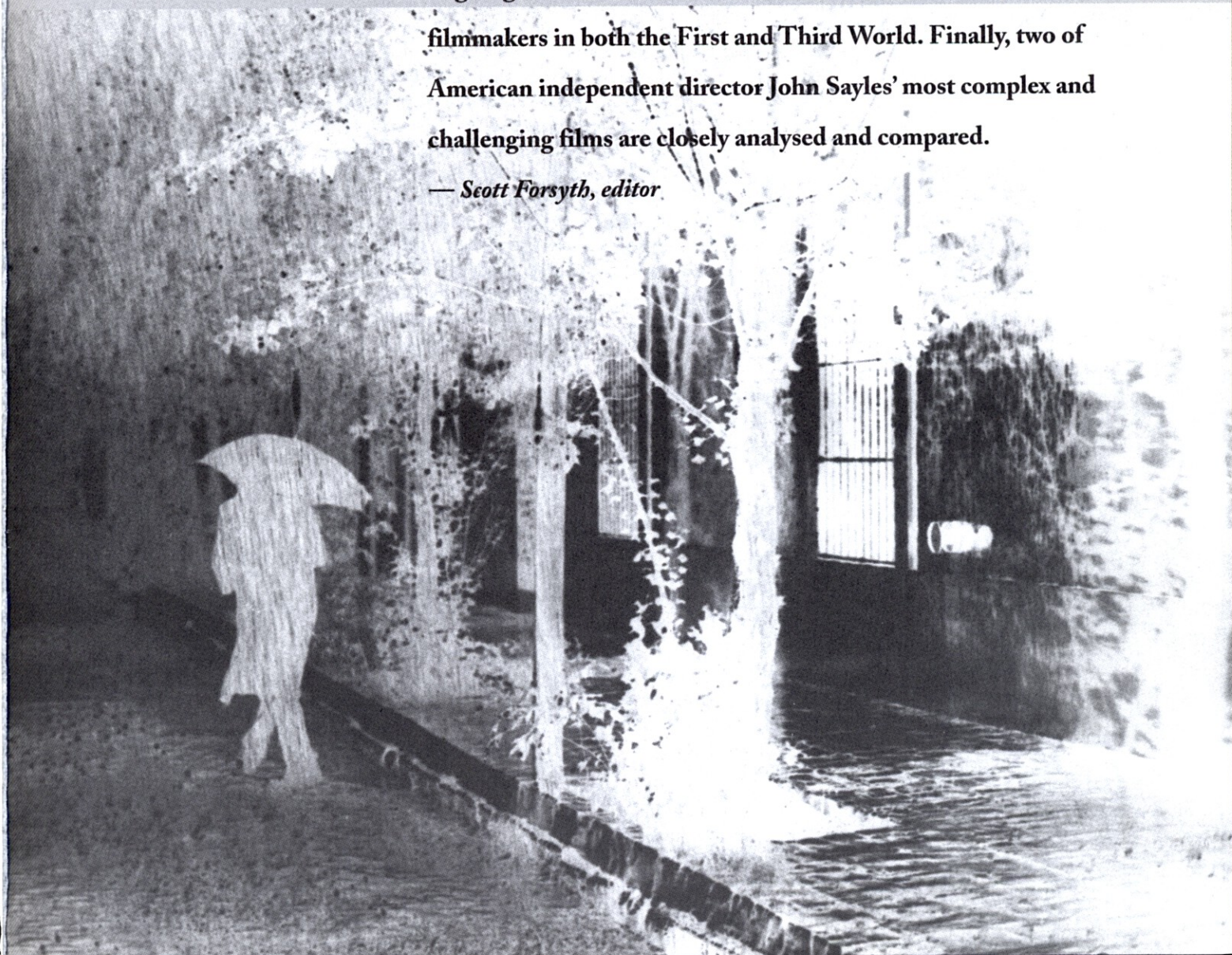
by Scott Forsyth



IN THIS ISSUE

Articles collected here address a range of important themes with varying perspectives, considering films and filmmakers from Canada, the United States and a number of countries of the so-called Third World. A selection of thematically related articles discusses important films and directors in recent Canadian film history, particularly troubling the conventional relationship of Canadian films to national representations with the conflicts and dilemmas of social class, race and gender. Several articles review films screened at the Toronto International Film Festival and festivals in Los Angeles. Several writers examine the ongoing tradition of militant Third Cinema in work by filmmakers in both the First and Third World. Finally, two of American independent director John Sayles' most complex and challenging films are closely analysed and compared.

— *Scott Forsyth, editor*



***John and the Missus* Progress, Resistance, and "Common Sense"**

by Malek Khouri

Introduction

Some breakthroughs have been made over the last three decades in the research on Canadian cinema's depiction of nation, race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. This helped enhance a socially 'interested' critical discourse on Canada's film culture as a whole. However issues related to the depiction of class in general and the Canadian working class in particular have not been similarly addressed by researchers. While over a long period of time, Canadian films have variably engaged issues reflecting upon, or/and relating to labour and class, connections between those issues were often elided or mystified through critical perspectives which privileged narrow understanding of the notions of identity as well as class.

Working people in Canada and worldwide are increasingly under attack by an aggressive corporate onslaught on their political and democratic rights, and their basic livelihood and future. Although it is not uncommon for many in the academia to virtually confuse their inability to recognize class struggles around them for an actual "disappearance" of those struggles, more people are realizing the need to acknowledge — and to get involved in resisting and ultimately reversing the outcome of — this class war. For their part, socialist and Marxist oriented film scholars have a responsibility to re-contextualize their critical analysis in relation to the depiction of class in cinema.

This article discusses how Gordon Pinsent's 1987 film *John and the Missus* delineates the fate of a working class community in a Newfoundland outport in 1962. I will elaborate on how the film privileges the notion of "free will" as a common-sensical re-articulation and re-production of capitalist ideological hegemony. But before I examine the film I will address briefly some important theoretical and methodological points which bear directly on my analysis. By defining those parameters



I also hope to make clear my use of specific terminology which over the last two decades — and for reasons which are not the subject of this article — began to lose their original analytical significance.

1. General Theoretical Framework

First, I believe that under capitalism the concept of individual uniqueness engulfs a constant search for what defines people in relation to the intimacy and illusion of their "secure" individual construct as opposed to the "totality" of commonality. In retrospect, relationships to smaller social units, institutions, or structures — to our families, our friends, and our local communities — and by our larger identification with a specific race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, and/or ethnic group, are perceived both as safe and acceptable frameworks for expressing one's social and political "agency." Yet gaining a "voice" on the sole basis of one's existence being "recognized" should not be conceived as identical to "empowerment" (or to agency). While they might form bases for empowerment, by itself, identity recognition in and by itself is not empowerment. "Empowerment" is a notion which relates to individual and group positions in relation to economic, social, and political power and domination. Just as accepting the bourgeoisie's claim of providing the best version of universal democracy for individuals is problematic at best, contentment with the rhetoric of being recognized and addressed as part of a "different" social group (as an end by itself) confuses and mystifies the nature and the political consequences of social categorization.

Second, when it comes to class it is important to emphasize its largely consciously articulated identity, one which I would argue that within the north American context in particular, has been deliberately muted, mystified, or confused. At best, this identity as Russel Bank suggested in a recent interview, (Bank is the writer of the original novel upon which Atom Egoyan's film *The Sweet Hereafter* was based) is talked about only in the context of other identities: for example, "so often race is identified with class, and we often talk about one in order not to talk about the other or we concede to one so that we won't concede to the other" (Ottawa Citizen, January 11, 1998). In other words, when it comes to social identity, opposing class interests, hopes, perspectives, and identifications are usually erased and re-articulated into "universalities" which surmount the materially and historically positioned class barriers and contradictions. Therefore, compared to gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, class identity relies upon a different level of identification which demands a conscious recognition of one's place within the less readily identified reality of class based economic and social relations of production. Restricting working class description to blue collar workers for example has been a problem not only among some Marxists, but has been a bourgeois ideological weapon to further mystify the notion of class among workers.

Third, I believe that critical assessment of film is neither a mere semiotic resistance, nor an isolated ideological struggle against what Lyotard claims to be a "cultural policy" (1984: 76). Rather, it is an element in a political struggle within historically specific hegemonic relationships, one which needs to appraise what the film most clearly manifests in relation to ideological intelligibilities. As such, a historical assessment of cinema

brings to the fore the contradictions of a hegemonic reading by the 'Other'. It also "illuminates" the tensions that mar the "dominant" reading, and re-introduces it as an "interested" reading which is open to contestation. Therefore, while aware of the primacy of the processes of production, distribution, and reception in defining and shaping the film medium, my reading will primarily inquire into how ideology works in a film like *John and the Missus* through articulating popular and common-sensical conceptions and "philosophies" about life under late capitalist conditions. This brings me to my fourth and final definition note.

My critical approach situates Pinsent's film in the context of the "common-sensical" intelligibilities of the period in which the film is set (1962), the period of its release (1986), and the general historical framework of late capitalism. To understand any intellectual climate presupposes an analysis of the underlying ideas or philosophies characterizing a specific milieu, how they are rooted in material practices and how they circulate within the various parts of the superstructure, how phenomena that might appear different contain a common ideological nucleus, the substance and functions of which may be reciprocally converted or translated from one to the other.

Common-sensical conceptions of the world are not simple reflections of "realities," but are rather means of negotiating one's position within it. They are not reflected images of predominant social and political conditions; nor are they simple false consciousness, or expressions of an Other's myth or ideology. Those conceptions are means of negotiating existing conditions that are specific to one's social and cultural background.

On the other hand, as a "philosophy," common sense is characterized by contending loyalties and alliances. In Gramsci's words, the concept of common sense is "ambiguous, contradictory, and multiform," and, although it may be called "the philosophy of the non-philosophers," it is not a "single unique conception, which is identical in time and space":

It is the 'folklore' of philosophy, and, like folklore, it takes countless different forms. Its most fundamental characteristic is that it is a conception which even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent, and inconsequential, in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is. (1971:419)



Having presented some terminological and methodological aspects of my approach, it is important here to conclude that my reading of *John and the Missus* therefore avoids what Fredric Jameson described (1985) as the unveiling of the sub-text of hidden ideological operations that exists within a cinematic text. It also avoids deciphering a system of an Other's ideology which "produces" false consciousness and hides its cultural operations by the very fact of its concealment of its identity. Instead, my analysis deals with what is already evident within the filmic text, in mediation with the historical ideological formation of late capitalism in Canada, of which it is part. It tests Pinsent's film against the ideological context it operates within, and thus provides a basis for attesting to the work of ideology through the film's common-sensical depiction of a working class community's resistance to a government forced resettlement program. By analyzing the film's narrative and its sympathetic depiction of Newfoundlanders' resistance to change, I will allude to the narrative's eventual delineation of social resistance as "non-sensical," and as a traditionalist attempt to postpone the benefits of "inevitable progress." On the other hand, I will examine how individual personal "resistance" in the film (associated with expressing and maintaining one's "free will" within the "free-wheeling" capitalist based economy), is proposed as the only feasible and desired form of resistance. Now to the film!

2. Between History and Fiction

John and the Missus is an adaptation of Pinsent's own 1974 novel, and his 1976 play of the same title. Even though the original novel differed slightly from the later produced play and film (see Andre Loiselle's excellent study of the differentiations between the three adaptations), all variations of the story maintained a personal nostalgic homage to Pinsent's roots in the outports of Newfoundland. This article bases its analysis on the cinematic depiction of the original novel.

During the year in which it joined the Canadian federation in 1949, Newfoundland had close to 1,500 rural communities most of which had fewer than 300 residents. Between 1953 and 1965, the province's government initiated an extensive program to amalgamate these communities into larger urban centres. Citing the cost and difficulty of providing roads and other services to remote outport towns, the program sought to resettle the residents of those areas in urban and semi-urban locations of the island. Financial assistance was provided to residents only when 100 percent of the community ratified their willingness to resettle. But by 1965 the plan only succeeded in resettling 115 communities comprising less than 7,500 people. Only after making some revisions to its strategy was the government successful in closing 119 further communities and relocating an additional 16,114 residents (Matthews:2-3).

Pinsent's film is set in a small town in Newfoundland in 1962 during the period in which the resettlement was already taking place. It presents a fictional account of the fate of specific individuals (mainly John, his wife Nan, his newly-wed son Matthew and his bride Faith) as they adapt to the harsh reality of forced displacement. Their town, Cup Cove, is subjected to virtual shutdown as a result of the provincial government's resettlement plan. The shutdown of the town in the film, however, is depicted in conjunction with the closing of the town's

main economic lifeline: its copper mine. As a result of a major accident, the town's mine — which employs the overwhelming majority of its working inhabitants — is forced to close and the government moves simultaneously to implement its plan to resettle the Cup Cove's residents.

Describing the process of resettlement in Newfoundland, David Macfarlane presents an image of virtual uprooting of the lives of entire communities:

[The program] reached its dizzy heights in the 1950's and 60's when poor outport communities that were too thinly populated to justify the construction of a road or a causeway were simply uprooted and moved to more convenient locations. Entire houses — their china shaking, their drapes billowing, their pots rattling, their dogs barking at the upstairs windows — were put up on floats and pulled across bays to be transplanted to more central communities. (1991: 125)

But as it resulted in some tragic consequences for most of the resettled, for others (particularly those with better access to capital), the resettlement program presented an opportunity for economic benefit. Describing his own family's position in this process, Macfarlane writes:

At times it seemed as if the entire island was up for tender. The Goodyears were in the right place at the right time with the right occupation. The family's move to the interior had been prophetic. They built roads, and when people travelled on those roads they ended up at one of the Goodyear's stores. It looked like the beginning of a dynasty. (125)

In analyzing the nature of the crisis in Newfoundland's economy during the late fifties to the early seventies, Frederick Johnstone links it to economic dependence as it relates to conditions which are similar to "Third World" underdevelopment. He rejects the conventional emphasis on "traditional backwardness," and draws attention to the need to reconsider instead the capitalist structure of economic power. He writes: "people were poor because wealth flowed out of their regions, due to resources being controlled by profit-seeking business in other regions" (176). Johnstone connects the process of economic deprivation in the area to the legacy of capitalist penetration of the "Third World" as neocolonialist imperialist hegemony. He reminds us that after World War Two:

This system had led to the uneven development of regions and unequal exchange between them. The rich areas got richer at the expense of the poor areas, because they controlled resources, credit, and the terms of trade. The capitalist core actively "underdeveloped" the Third World periphery over a long period of time. The Third World did not arise naturally; it was created. (176-177)

However, much of the discourse on Newfoundland's economic development presents itself as an inquiry into the island's problematic embrace of progress and modernization. While acknowledging the significant obstacles to regional growth — noting, for example, the foreign exploitation of provincial



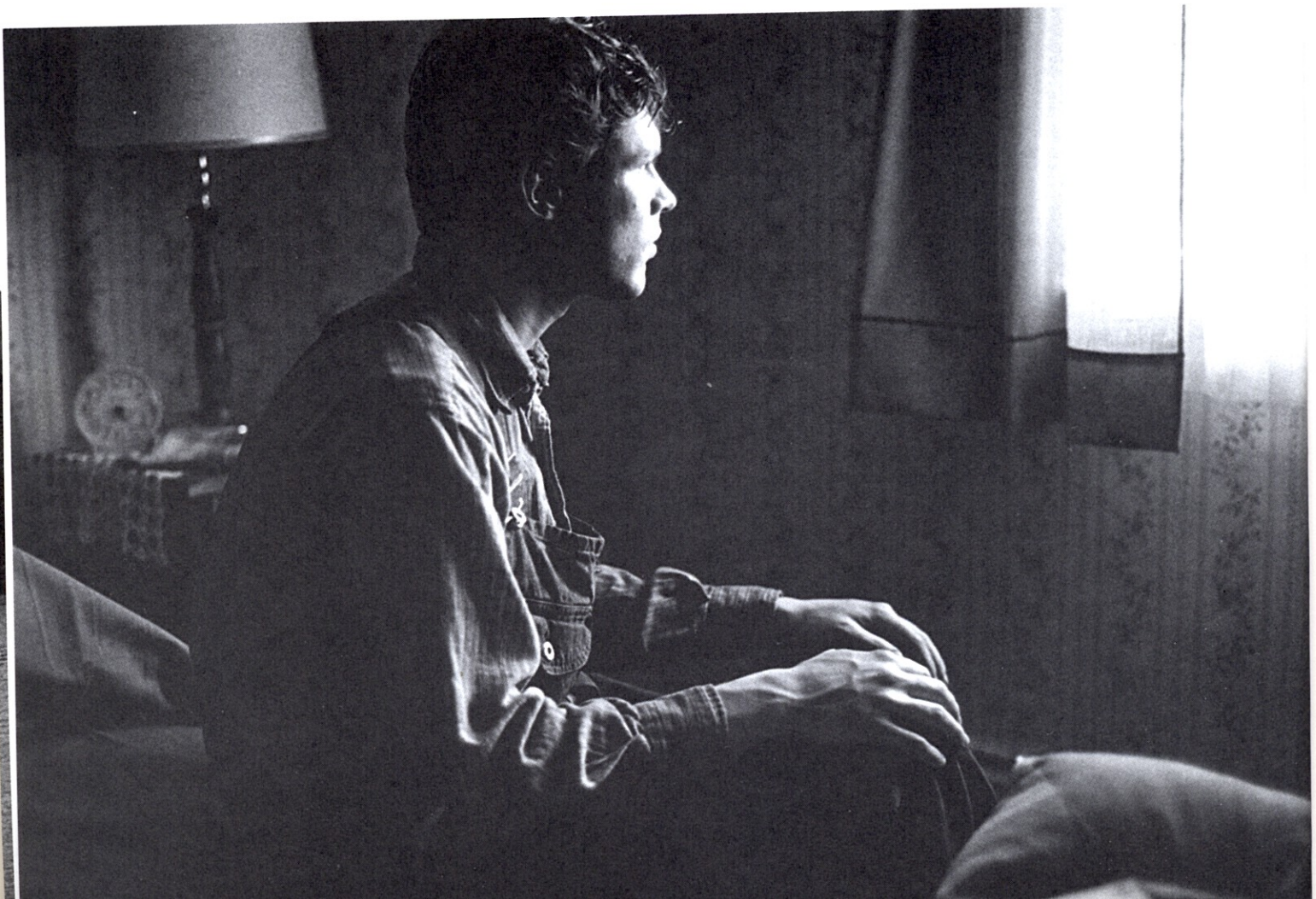
resources, the alteration of aqua-environments and the challenges of geographical isolation — this discourse "tend[s] to reserve the most vigorous finger-pointing for Newfoundlanders themselves" (Sullivan, 1994: 189-190). Newfoundland workers, Sullivan points out, have been berated for harbouring the underdevelopment of their region through "their devotion to "backward" or traditional" work methods and through their lack of support of government-sponsored growth initiatives" (190).

For its part, and as it deals directly with a situation where a working class community faces virtual displacement, *John and the Missus* presents a specific interpretation of history, progress, and resistance as common-sensical "philosophies." The drive to resettle Cup Cove's residents occurs within contradictory circumstances: while it is (logical) for the town's inhabitants to move into larger and more advanced dwellings in the mainland, it is not desirable (nor logical) on the other hand that they leave behind the traditional social, familial, and traditional ties they have developed in Cup Cove over several generations. As a result of this contradiction, subaltern "resistance" becomes desirable and John becomes the beacon of this resistance. While it accounts for "change" as heralded by the inevitability and the benefits of economic and technological progress, the film proposes "resistance" as an isolated individual struggle against the negative consequences of modernization, and as an assertion of one's rhetorical expression of his/her "free will."

3. The Chain of Progress Between the Past and the Future

As with the dominant discourse on Newfoundland's economic development, the narrative of the film sets the stage for an ideologically "common-sensical" resolution of the dilemma of resettlement as set within the parameters of the "problematic" embrace (or the lack of it) of "modernization" by Newfoundlanders. As Cup Cove enters a period of instability due to the decision by the mine owners to start laying off workers, the community is challenged to come up with its own answer to the dilemma. However, a major explosion occurs in the mine causing several casualties including the death of one of John's close friends. Under such circumstances, to keep the mine open and ultimately to sustain life in Cup Cove becomes an unrealistic and even dangerous alternative.

A common-sensical interpretation of history tends to transform it into a homogenized past. It becomes an abstruse moment with a muddled relation to the economic, political, legal, and philosophical practices of a specific society. It is transformed into an interpretation of the past necessitated by the common-sensical demands of the present. In the context of conceiving change as inevitable, nostalgia becomes a commodified version of what Althusser labelled as 'historicism', which on one hand promises continuity and stability, and on the other hand forges the 'ideal' social subjects that are essential for the maintenance and the development of the economic and social order of the day.



Michael Dorland suggests that "the operative dimension of Canadian time is, at best, that of nostalgia; the longing for a past that never was from the perspective of a present one cannot accept (7). However, subaltern nostalgia is also a trajectory for change and progress. This makes the present — one which Dorland conceives as "unacceptable" — in reality bearable and acceptable to the marginalized classes and social groups, and in other words, common-sensical. Let me demonstrate how this is achieved in the film.

The opening segment incorporates John and his wife Nan and the 'historical' face of Mr. Fudge. The past (history) is introduced as a memory, and is merged into the present through the Missus' touching hand which introduces us to John in the present. Lost in his memory, John relates the continuity of the present (his wife) to the comfort of the reassuring hand of an early settler (Mr. Fudge). In this scene, the film sets out the couple's facility to be part of the inevitable process of movement between the past and the present. It inextricably intertwines the 'transformation' of Mr. Fudge's hand into the hand of the Missus.

More than simply constructing her point of view (position) as the audiences' look and position as Andre Loisele suggests (1994:77), the film's identification with Nan's look consistently re-identifies us with her role as the link between the past and the present. The Missus is a mediator who heralds the ensuing evolution which eventually leads John (albeit based on 'his own terms' as we will see later) to submit to the proposal of resettlement. Nan's silent sympathy with moving out of Cup Cove is matched by Mr. Fudge's passive observance of the unfolding events which he has no power to interfere in. Toward the end of the film, as John throws Mr. Fudge's black hat into the water in a gesture of his break with one symbol of the past (Cup Cove), Nan utters a painful sigh. John puts his arm around her in a reassuring display of continuity between a retained past (the house, and his marriage), the present-change, and the future. The presence of the Missus (present-change) becomes the natural evolution and 'substitute' for the absence of Mr. Fudge's hat (the past-tradition).

Thus, change in the film is rendered open, to move toward the past as much as away from it. This ambiguous view of the relationship between present-future and past depicts the preoccupations of the present not merely as the interests of the moment but as eternal needs. They become significant for the past, the present, and the future, all as part of one homogeneity. As such, the film's notion of tradition becomes a common-sensical component in the process of de-historicizing history, and allowing the concept of change and modernization to become synonymous only with pre-determined continuity rather than with a historically open dialectic. The needs of the present (e.g., making a decision regarding resettling away from Cup Cove) re-invent the past (e.g., recalling the tradition of early settlement, family, hard work, community etc.,) thereby preparing for an evolutionary, non-threatening and common sensical form of change.

4. Change, Technology, and Continuity

Another crucial element in the film's depiction of continuity in change relates to the role of technology. The affiliation between

the Canada of today and its past (including that of the Atlantic region) is charged with contradictory dynamics which refer to social change. Furthermore, and as with other advanced civil societies, political culture in Canada regards change as a sign of vitality and negation of stagnation — which is associated with the past and tradition. Within these dynamics, technology (as a signifier of the future and of change) assumes a particularly privileged position in Canadian cultural discourse. While it varies between different perspectives and approaches, this discourse generally maintains some invariable assumptions in relation to technology as a formative vehicle of progress and change. Change is perceived as a way of accepting the inevitability of the future as technological progress irrespective of the social forces and dynamics that control, enhance, or interact with the process. This form of change is "imagined" as infinite prospects. Yet, society under late capitalism remains generally cautious about "change" as a whole, because it also propagates possible disorder, interruption, and lack of direction. While it is occasionally rendered as a thinly disguised chaos which undermines the principles of an orderly society (concerns around the "negative" effects of information technology are examples of such caution), change as part of technological progress remains a condition of individual innovation and breakthroughs upon which the Canadian entrepreneurial imagination is constructed. In the words of Arthur Kroger:

What makes the discourse on technology such a central aspect of the Canadian imagination is that this discourse is situated midway between the future of the New World and the past of European culture, between the rapid unfolding of the "technological imperative" in the American empire and the classical origins of the technological dynamo in European history. (1984: 7)

John and the Missus depicts the past as it "moulds" into the future through technical innovation. The film's delineation of this linkage places it as part of an evolutionary and non-threatening transformation. After John cuts a tree branch into a whistle pipe and hands it over to his young neighbour (Robert), the boy hears a loud sound. As he looks up to discern the source of that sound, a supersonic plane buzzes through the sky above. The image of young Robert looking upward is immediately followed by the image of John gazing foreword as he examines one of the town's recently abandoned houses. "Wouldn't be bad for young Matt," John tells his friend Alf.

The sequence refers to "technology" (i.e., the plane) not as a threatening omen, but as continuity and as part of an evolutionary change to which tradition (i.e., continuity of familial ties) can be incorporated. Change as technology is conceived as a signifier of "natural" progression between young and old, primitiveness and innovation, past and present. The boy's interest in the newer form of technology (i.e., the plane) is juxtaposed with John's mastery of more traditional technology (the pipe). The difference between the two seemingly contradictory interests of the two generations is depicted in a rather complementary manner, one which suggests a "natural" displacement through progression between one generation and the other.

The narrative maintains a consistent association between

youth and technology. It introduces us to John's son Matthew as the young man with the blue car, and his wife Faith as the young woman with the camera. The couple are captivated by the idea of seizing and captivating the beauty of Cup Cove (the past). The way they do that, however, is by driving their car through the town roads or by capturing its sceneries on film (i.e., via utilizing the technical instruments of the present-future). The film's fascination with technological adaptation and its affiliation with the symbolic embrace by youth situates it within a process of evolutionary inevitability and fate (a 'normality' which is identical to the generational displacement between the young and the old). To quote Kroker once again:

It is the gamble of the Canadian discourse on technology that, in disclosing the full horizon of the technological simulacrum within which we are trapped, and in revealing possibilities for transforming technique in the direction of human emancipation, Canadian thought partakes of the 20th century by posing the question of the human fate. (18-19)

This characterized inevitability which is generally associated with the Canadian discourse on technology compliments the common-sensical conceptions on social and political resistance. Let me examine this question in more detail.

5. Towards the Future: Submission as Resistance

Many Newfoundlanders conceived of the proposed resettlement program as a scheme to help the big corporations exploit the cheap labour of the impoverished and newly displaced settlers (Brox, 1969: 67). In passing, it is important to remind ourselves, that as a result of such displacements (ones that continue today under different forms and pretexts in all Canadian east coast communities), local culture in Newfoundland has maintained and acquired a significant repertoire of anti-resettlement songs which articulate this experience as a tragic separation from a traditional way of life and resources (Sullivan, 1994: 204).

While major difficulties have characterized labour and independent political action in Newfoundland during the 1950s and 60s, collective forms of resistance on the island were not so totally absent as the film chooses to imply. Describing the nature, the size, and the impact of labour activities around that period in Badger (a town less than fifty kilometres away from the fictional setting of Gordon Pinsent's Cup Cove), David Macfarlane writes:

In January 1959, twelve thousand loggers struck against the paper mills in Newfoundland. It was a vicious, bitter dispute, and when premier Smallwood called in the RCMP and a young officer in the royal Newfoundland constabulary had his skull cracked open at a violent demonstration on the main street of Badger, my grandfather concluded that, if Newfoundland was any indication, the world had finally gone mad. (156)

In an island with less than half a million people, labour action of such magnitude cannot but have some impact on the collective political, social, and cultural memory of the community.

The film's conception of resistance and memory, however, is quite different.

John and the Missus re-inscribes existing social and economic order by demonstrating the contradictory yet complementary allegiances of Cup Cove's residents as they react to the government's plan to resettle them away from the outport. The town residents' common-sensical understanding — including that of their most vocal opponent of the plan — of the 'reality' of progress and the impossibility (and worthlessness) of collective social resistance, leads eventually to their willing submission to the new order. As it poses a discourse on history which divulges sympathy for a "traditional" perspective of the world (i.e., appreciation of family, hard work, love of the place of birth, and fidelity to social and cultural values and heritage as moral high grounds for resisting the recklessness of progress), the film simultaneously presents progress as an inevitable fate: a despised, but nevertheless a desirable destiny.

When John and the rest of the mine workers are finally informed about the decision to close the mine and about the resettlement plan, John's own conception of his future as historical nostalgia (i.e., remaining to live in Cup Cove with his son's family as a continuation of the tradition of earlier settlers) is contrasted with the more dynamic notion of change as present (i.e., resettlement). His angry protest against this interruption in the chain of evolutionary continuity between past, present, and future becomes the high point in the dramatic development of the film.

The explosion in the town's copper mine results in the death and serious injury of several miners. The incident creates the pretext which prompts the owner (Tom) and the government representative (Danny) to start implementing their original plan to resettle the community in another part of the island. Independence, love, the possibility of procreation, and ultimately change, are posed against the rigidity and the sterility of hanging on to the past (in this case, the option of staying in Cup Cove). John's attempt to resist the government's decision is clearly doomed to failure. Lying down on his death bed after he is fatally injured in the explosion, Alf appeals to his friend John to accept keeping the mine closed down.

The inevitability of submission is also marked forcefully by the role played by John's son Matthew. Matthew's problematic relationship with "tradition" is proposed earlier in the film when he hesitates to make love to his wife Faith because they happen to be sleeping in Matthew's grandfather's bed. Later, in an intimation of his father's isolation, Matthew, along with other town workers, picks up his resettlement application form and walks out leaving the old man standing behind alone in the town hall. Youth (the present-future) has opted for the hegemonical viable form of inevitable and desired "change."

Earlier, as he carries Alf's coffin for burial, John's voice is heard in the background addressing his departed friend while simultaneously contemplating his own fate: "Your feet could only go wherever you wanted to go, just like mine . . . till now. Now, you have to go where [they] say you go, and you have no say about it. What would you think of that...Imagine that...No say in the matter..." The bitterness expressed here by John is submerged in his genuine inability to change the course of the events surrounding him. 'Future' just like death, is sealed as



inevitability, a fate and natural evolution, and John — just like his dead friend — has "no say in the matter."

At this point the film becomes a measure of the possibilities available for the entire community; a collectivity of the subaltern faced with the determined will of the guardians of progress: the economic power structures. The film sets in motion a chain of motifs leading towards the town's consent, and towards the symbolically significant consent by John himself. While posing possible sites of active resistance, the narrative simultaneously links and depicts those sites in the context of parochiality and anti-progress.

John responds angrily to the government's offer for resettlement. But while his position gives him a "moral" high ground, his "resistance" is nevertheless destined to failure. John's motif is intertwined with clinging to the graves of the elders: his vision of the future (clinging to the past), becomes synonymous with death: "will anybody recognize my grave? . . . you sir are telling me where to die," John challenges the government official as he points his finger towards the town's graveyard while holding his

father's clock in the same hand. Defiance against the "new order" is clearly hampered by John's reliance on the past (his ancestors' grave) for legitimizing resistance.

But without resolving the impasse about resistance in a common-sensical way, the film would remain ideologically problematic. Understanding the "realities" of progress and the impossibility (or worthlessness) of resistance, leads the town residents to a willing acceptance of resettlement. But John's submission to the new fate, however, would amount to total surrender to oppression — a situation which while in itself is not problematic or far fetched, it is on the other hand a situation which is usually not admitted as such (i.e., as surrender). Instead, the film resituates the dilemma of resistance within a different end in the "chain of progress."

The narrative centres around the question of moving to the future without disregarding the past (i.e., maintaining the dignity of the past/tradition as an element of stability and continuity). John is finally convinced that something has to be done in regard to the future. He tells his family: "we're staying." This

time, however, John incorporates elements from the future to sustain continuity: he suggests building a new extension for his son's new family at the back of his own house. But while his challenge sustains our sympathy (because it upholds respect for an important element of the chain of progress: that of the past/tradition) John nevertheless fails in convincing his family about this plan. His failure is directly linked to the fact that his conception of the future does not go beyond recreating the past (i.e., clinging to Cup Cove).

Furthermore, the future, embodied in John's own son, interferes to reject the father's proposal: "I am not staying!" Matt avows. In their search for new living grounds, Matt and his wife Faith want to get as far away from the temporal (the past) and geographical (the island) intersections of their current life as possible. However, the limits to their desired journey are already determined by the fate of the entire town.

The notion of change here once again assumes the shape of destiny or fate, one that no one can genuinely resist. While the only alternative to this situation cannot be but submission, this submission as introduced in the film however, is not simply a servility to coercion. Instead, it is an attempt to legitimize one's inability to provide alternative resistance: it becomes one's concept of dealing "pragmatically" with the "real" world. As such, it can even be "twistily" conceived as victory: a successful way of "weathering the storm!" It is a social and political submission which reflects a common-sensical accommodation of moving to the future, and away from tradition, while maintaining one's individual "free will."

When forced to recognize the worthlessness of his "social" defiance (i.e., his attempt to convince the town's people and his son's family to stay in Cup Cove), John articulates a new version of common-sensical "resistance." John's rejection of "change" this time is linked to his need to qualify, to himself, to his family, and to the rest of Cup Cove his submission to being part of the evolutionary chain of progress. He does that through pronouncing his own "free willed" intention to move toward the future while incorporating his own past and "tradition." The ensuing stretch of the film leads to re-establishing the stability in the chain which connects the past, present, and future. John and his wife physically move their house and belongings (as an accommodation of both the nostalgia for their past, as well as their move towards the future), and begin a journey across the Notre Dame Bay — a journey which compliments the present-change as envisaged through resettlement.

John's new history is consequently rewritten by setting out on a journey of renewal which leads him back to another collective imaginary symbolic of the island's "traditional" forms of resistance: the "dream" of abandoning the island for the big city or the mainland. John and Nan's reinstatement of the past (the house and each other), restores stability and continuity to the previously disrupted historical chain; however, it is a stability associated with their own 'authentic' (read: consensual) mode of articulating the past, the present, and the future within the framework of existing power relations. Their fate becomes a statement which compliments and embodies the function of the working class under capitalist mode of production: disposable labour power. It is a fate which the working class (according to the ideological framework of capitalism) cannot, and has no means of resisting,

one that it can only accept, or adjust to, as inevitable.

Although the ostensible dimension of the journey represents the couple's own version of the present-change (the film does not make certain the destination of John and Nan's resettlement), their goal remains a component of the collective submission to the common-sensical reality of "progress" to which everyone else in Cup Cove has already succumbed. As John and Nan sail offshore and arrive at their first intended 'destination' (Shoe Cove), Nan goads John to move on. "It looks like home, doesn't it!" John tells his wife. "Yes," she replies, and urges him to continue on. As their destination becomes an open-ended question, the journey itself is rendered a culmination of the "infinite possibilities" that they (as a working class couple) hold, a voyage built to exemplify their ultimate triumph in their ability to find their own destiny.

On the one hand, the journey reinstates John and Nan's relationship. It marks the intense emotions we expect them to bring to the renewed substitute of the happiness they left behind in Cup Cove. On the other hand, the journey rationalizes the couple's submission to a "new lifestyle" which was forced upon them by the all powerful wheel of "progress" and "modernization."

The haunting presence of the "old folks" and Mr. Fudge throughout the film indicates John's longing for the past as future. It symbolizes John's loathing of the "logic" of the authorities, as well as his desire for "non-mediated" cognizance. John rejects the present-change as he is disinclined to enter the "future" as proposed by the authorities. Yet dropping out of the collective common sense of his town peers, he remains bound by the larger ideological framework of consent. John's "independent" logic does not transcend the non-discursivity of a "free" person obtaining his/her authority of freedom from within his/her own immanent self.

The climactic stand which puts John beyond the 'logic' of other working class members of his community is made possible by having his own house (his more direct little space) physically dragged across the bay. The consideration here is not to recognize the discrepancy between claim and reality, but the possibility of individual labour "opposition" (as opposed to anti-capitalist collective opposition) and, in the absence of such possibility, the feasibility of personalized forms of resistance to the 'excesses' of reckless capitalism. Through their journey, John and Nan privatize the contestation of values, and by supposedly 'dropping out', also succeed in making their own peace with the world: their option reincorporates the prosaic lifestyle of a likely "wanderer."

The mainland and the world outside the island add yet another symbolic dimension to the ideological options provided by the narrative. In retrospect, those sites provide a cognitive frame for the people of Cup Cove. References to those symbolic spaces (the photographs in the travel brochures, the travel fables told by Fred, and the stories of success uttered by the baker who left the island to open a successful business in Hamilton) are used as the standard against which most characters and their experiences are probed and either found morally lacking, and thus rejected as anti-tradition (as in the case of John), or considered agreeable and hence undertaken as the only option by the rest of the community.

Fred's last stand, however, culminates in his death. After throwing away his travel brochures and "souvenirs," he embarks

on the only "voyage" he could realistically take: his final departure from life. As the ultimate imaginary traveller and the never settled (or resettled) islander, Fred is the one character who does not belong to the past (as nostalgia), the present (as consent), or the future (as false hope). His dreams become ideological signifiers of the impossibility of articulating imagination (and consequently, agency) into reality.

Conclusion

Politics and economics are consistently concerned with history. But history in the context of class based ideology has been consistently given a specific epistemological dimension. An example is how colonial based studies of the colonized worlds and cultures has invariably "moulded" them into a "historical" narrative based on their "oldness" and "primitiveness" in comparison to the more "advanced" and "civilized" colonial culture. It advanced a methodology in terms of which not only past and "Other" cultures, but all living societies were irrevocably placed on a temporal pitch, a stream of movement within history — some upstream, other downstream. Civilization, evolution, development, modernization (and their cousins, industrialization, urbanization, technological progress) are all terms whose conceptual content drives from evolutionary history.

Within this context, and as it provides an outlook at the history associated with the events that took place in the early 1960s in Newfoundland, *John and the Missus* presents a "cohesive" statement on Canadian social and economic "realities" within the specificity of economic downsizing, global corporate expansion and free trade agreements, as well as the explosion of information technology, all of which became more prominent features of Canadian social and political culture since the early 1980s. When *John and the Missus* was produced ten years ago, Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney was rapt with selling the first Free Trade Agreement with the U.S. as the only "sensible" way of competing and functioning in a new global economy. Since then, this is a practice which has been repeatedly introduced by mainstream Canadian politicians of all stripes, as well as by corporate mouthpieces in the media.

Over the last two decades, one way of articulating policies that had negative social effects on the less economically "fortunate" segments of society, and particularly of working class Canadians, has been through aligning such policies with ideas about change, progress, and technological civilization. A good example of this relates to how the premier of Ontario, in his last election campaign, associated his economic anti-deficit program with the slogan of "common sense." Even more prevalent has been the preoccupation of multinational corporations with the rhetoric around information technology as harbinger for change and as basis for transforming economic and social realities within a new global free market.

Under late capitalism, "change" is equated with "natural" and inevitable technological and economic evolution. In this context, social passivity in relation to political decision-making is conceived as the only sensible "alternative." However, self-determination (both individual, and collective) remains an important aspect of bourgeois ideological values which needs to be adapted if "change" is to occur without major social upheavals. In other words, in order to be part of the late capi-

talist concept of change, one needs to articulate his/her own way of surviving through the ordeals that come with such major changes. One needs to negotiate ways of coping with the "benefits" as well as the repercussions of "progress."

As an ideological construction, history under late capitalism re-inscribes the past that is recovered in the name of change, making it as harmless and non-threatening as possible. However, for the past to be consumed for the sake of the present, it has to be first transformed into "tradition." As such, tradition becomes an element in an uninterrupted chain which joins it with the concept of evolutionary modernization. It provides the basis for familiarity and stability.

The construction of tradition as an ideological entity is nevertheless subdued so that the view of reality seems inevitable, natural and, more importantly, common sensical. This moulding of history into tradition erases the dynamics of the past, while projecting it as a moment of clarity and sameness in which the interests of the present (i.e., current production relations) are rendered natural and eternal. Through exploring change as fate and as a vehicle within an uninterrupted process which links the past, the present, and the future in the chain of evolutionary history, *John and the Missus* inscribes a common-sensical story of dissent in a marginalized working class community. By traditionalising this community's struggle for survival, it reinscribes submission as "free will, and "free will" as resistance.

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The Glace Bay Miners' Museum/ Margaret's Museum: Adaptation and Resistance

by Peter Urquhart

The film *Margaret's Museum* (Mort Ransen, 1995) is the end result of the lengthy and meandering evolution of literary texts by Sheldon Currie: beginning with a ballad written in 1962 ("The Ballad of Charlie Dave"), to the short story "The Glace Bay Miners' Museum" (1976, republished in 1979 and 1995), to radio (1991) and stage (1995) plays based on this story by Wendy Lill, and finally to the novel *The Glace Bay Miners' Museum* (1995), a text which is not strictly speaking the "source" for the film *Margaret's Museum*.¹ This lineage is extraordinary by any standards, but certainly as far as the study of adaptation is concerned, and Currie has himself remarked:

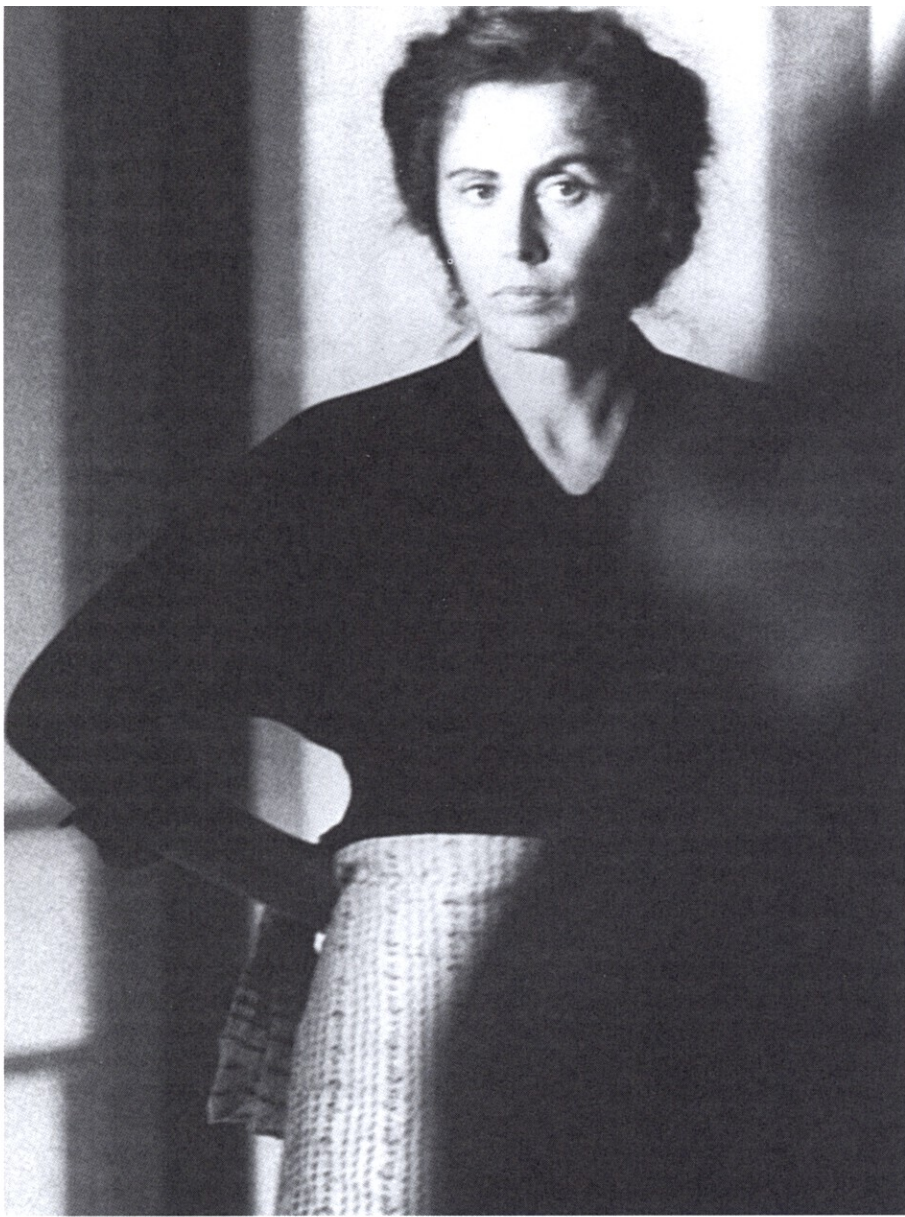
sometimes I ask myself: where did this story get the strength to withstand so many transformations, and finally to attract the enormous resources of the movie industry to our beloved island? This is what I think: The key to the story is its narrator Margaret, a smart, resourceful woman who made the best of life in a coal town. When I discovered her voice, it was as if the story wrote itself (Currie 2).

Although this essay is concerned specifically with examining the novel *The Glace Bay Miners' Museum* and the film *Margaret's Museum*, Currie gestures in this brief quotation toward some of the threads I want to pull on: that the key to the story is Margaret's narration, and that it is their "enormous resources" which ultimately characterize the movie industry, and which, along with the absence of Margaret's first-person narration in the film, partially recast the story into *Margaret's Museum*. One of my argument's premises is that each text is a resistant one on some levels — primarily concerned with class, nation, and gender issues — and that the form each version adopts almost necessarily considerably alters each text's resistant thrust, each emphasizing different resistant discourses.

Typically studies of adaptation have centred on attempts to locate the intrinsic or essential qualities of each media in order to discover what each can and cannot "do." Here, though, I want first to explore the theoretical and structural *similarities* between the forms realist novel and realist film, and suggest (as is generally agreed)

1. The novel's copyright page describes the book as "a contribution toward Jerry Wexler and Mort Ransen's script" for *Margaret's Museum*. This distinction shows that this is not really a case of weighing an "original" text against its cinematic adaptation so much as the comparison and contrast of the content and form of somewhat discrete texts.





that the main point of comparison ought to be on the study of narrative itself, and the relationships between narrative and form in fiction and in cinema.

Barbara Foley's book *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction 1929-1941* asks whether, "as a form historically linked to bourgeois individualism, the novel — in particular, the realist novel — can be effectively employed as a vehicle for contesting bourgeois consciousness, and articulating class or collective consciousness" (249). She notes how literary radicals in the 1930s often insisted on radical form to compliment challenges to bourgeois thought (250), describing the then-prevailing view thus: "the production of social revolution enabled, and was enabled by, the production of revolutionary forms of representation and that continuing to use inherited forms would in fact impede the promotion of revolutionary consciousness" (252). Of course, the politics of representation are not as simple as this. When IBM and Coca Cola and Nike adopt "radical" representational strategies to sell their products, what are we to make of claims for the radicalness of form itself? It would appear that the "problems" for resistant content are virtually analogous in the cases of novels and films, and that a study of both "story" and "discourse" (to use Seymour

Chapman's useful terms) is necessary to discover the relationships between the texts being considered here. Therefore, in the case of novel-to-film adaptation we face the duel comparison of literary discourse to cinematic one, plus literary story to cinematic one. The task, then, is to weigh each story against the other, compare the discourses as well, and draw conclusions based on both of these litmus tests. The very process of adaptation often assumes that it should be possible for the same story to be told by both (or many) discourses, a premise based on the notion that the *discourses* novel and film must be significantly different, which might not be the case. Let's test this hypothesis first.

Retuning to Foley's discussion of formal problems faced by proletarian fiction which adopted the realist novel form, she first cites the many and various arguments for its essentially bourgeois nature (arguments which have been applied to realist cinema as well), including: the pronounced displacement of social change by character development (and the fact that any change effected will always be by individuals, not societies or collectivities), the appearance of choice and freedom of interpretation for the reader/spectator in the face of actual coercive and authoritarian enforcement by the text, and — crucially — the inevitability of "solutions" as the narrative drives toward its ultimate closure. Following from this summary of the critique of the realist novel, Foley notes how those subscribing to this view necessarily discount the possibility of resistant content in any text adopting this form, quoting Lennard Davis' *Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction*: "as soon as the author creates characters, puts them in a place, has them engage

in dialogue, and gets embroiled in a plot...the novelist is stuck with the baggage of ideology..."(257). These kinds of arguments are old hat in film studies, too, of course, based on the same principles of individual (rather than collective) struggle or development, a false appearance of a hierarchy of discourses, and an almost built-in optimism that problems can and will be solved.

And throughout the 1970s, some film theorists, while essentially agreeing with the position that it is narration itself which renders the narrative cinema politically inert, saw the cinema's principle property — visual imagery, especially as it is used in the name of cinematic realism — as further compounding the problem. Colin MacCabe, for instance, "identified the epistemology underlying classical realist cinema as empirical: "for the knowledge which the classic realist film delivers is founded, fundamentally, on sight" (qtd. in Hill, 60). Summarizing MacCabe's conclusion from this, John Hill writes, "knowledge of social and political relations do not derive from what is visible, but from an understanding of what is invisible" (60). Thus, writes MacCabe, classical realist cinema is "fundamentally inimical to the production of political knowledge" (60). In this vein, Christine Gledhill observes that "cinematic realism is

dependent upon an ideological proposition that reality equals what you can see; that perception equals cognition' (qtd. in Hill 60). Thus, a realist film can "show" poor people in the streets, but "the mechanics of capitalism or distribution of wealth are not things which can be seen," a fact which explains the inevitable emphasis of the personal over the socio-political under this representational system (Hill 60).

Let's try this idea out on the texts under examination here. Consider one of the pivotal scenes of the novel *Glace Bay Miners' Museum* — one which is necessarily quite different from its analogous one in the film, with this difference illuminating both Gledhill's point as well as the possibilities for resistance in these forms: in *The Glace Bay Miners' Museum*, Peggy's father, Mr. Campbell, the mine manager, arrives at the Currie house to drag his daughter home from an evening of card-playing and radio-listening. Instead, he is provoked into a explanation of the futility of mine strikes in Cape Breton: he explains in some detail how political and economic machinations well beyond his (and the miners') control severely limit his (and their) options. Campbell is a sympathetic — if uninspiring, and perhaps too resigned — character, and convinces Ian and Neil (miners and strike-organizers) that what he says is true — that any strike at the mine is doomed.

However, in the analogous scene in *Margaret's Museum*, Campbell's self-confessed failing or inadequacy is not political/ideological, but utterly personal. It is true, that he could have been shot delivering the speech about the complex international web of finance and power which force the miners into exploitation, but instead, we find the following exchange (with no mention of a strike, of course):

Neil: You don't own me, I'm not a miner.

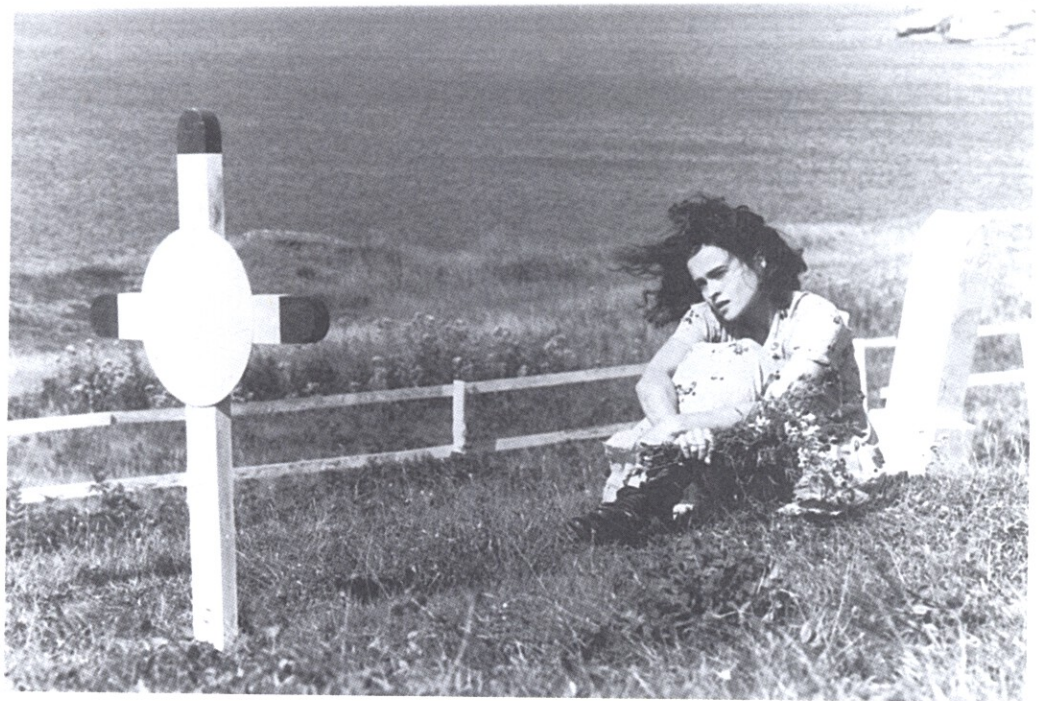
Campbell: I'm not an owner, I'm a manager, and I can't even manage my own daughter.

Or consider another example: one of the integral totems of resistance in the novel (not to mention a vital "exhibit" in each text's museum) is the collection of scribbles which Margaret discovers contain more than just grandpa's prosaic daily requests. Pages of the novel are devoted to describing the centrality of these scribbles to Margaret's rising self-awareness as a woman, and as working-class woman with a long history. What do we find in *Margaret's Museum*'s scribbles? Do we find anything like the seething material history located in the novel's scribbles? No: instead, the only thing we find in the film's scribbles is Jimmy's exceedingly juvenile "erotica," which is wielded by Neil as article of humiliation. This is another example of how the utterly personal motivates many of the serious story events in the film, in ways that they are dominated by oppositional politics in the novel. One explanation for these choices made in the course of the adaptation may be that Gledhill is right about film's tendency to emphasize the personal over the socio-political.



On the other hand, returning again to Foley, she cites Carole Snee and Peter Widdowsdown, contemporary critics who argue not that form is neutral, but that in some cases, politics (or "content") may be primary, and form secondary in a text's ultimate ability to put forth a resistant stance. Foley calls this the "tendency" position — one which allows the possibility of progressive politics even within the bourgeois ideology bound up in the practice of the realist novel. This is a position which even Lennard Davis's hardcore argument must even grudgingly admit to. He writes: "to argue that the novel can defy its defensive function is to argue that horses are born without legs — it happens, but not very often, and in spite of formal requirements" (227). This "tendency" position seems useful for my purposes here as well, as a position which will allow me to explain at least one significant reason for the textual differences between Currie's novel and Ransen's film, for, as Foley writes, "we must...insist that discussions of the ideologies embedded in genres always be linked to discussions of the specific politics encoded in specific [texts]" (262). This is also, in essence, one aspect of Raymond Williams' rebuttal to McCabe and 70s *Screen* theory: that realism and naturalism have a long tradition of politically-progressive content; that,





"...the diagnosis of 'realism' as a bourgeois form is cant" (123).

Of the significant differences between each text's story, the most important must be the absence of a strike in *Margaret's Museum*.² It is true that the exploitation of coal miners is a sub-text of the film, but the novel devotes a large part of its narrative to outlining the events leading up to, during, and following a strike by the miners in Reserve Mines and Glace Bay. In a typically cinematic manoeuvre, the film chooses, instead of difficult-to-represent collective action, to show us a scene of individual character development — Angus burns down the company store. But even this scene (which looks terrific cinematically) cannot be read as especially politically charged since it is both played for laughs, and has very small consequences for the characters. Likewise, two of the story's main characters, Neil Currie and Margaret's brother Jimmy (who is called Ian in the novel), are miners throughout the novel, but only toward the end of the film. Labour and class, it seems, are much less important concerns in the film.

In his recent essay "When Class Disappears" American culture critic Thomas Frank explains how the ascendance of what he calls the "lifestyle" revolution has overwhelmed and completely subsumed labour (and/or class) struggle in the United States in the last few years. He writes:

for contemporary American media-makers, complacent with an almost unprecedented world-historical self assurance, the market is the only appropriate matrix for understanding human affairs. Business is life; management is government;

markets are democracy; entrepreneurs are artists. And the more directly these principles are stated, the better. (6).

Similarly, David E. James explains in his introduction to a recent book on cinema and the question of class, that the "zero-sum rules of academic identity politics" have seen class pushed to the margins of scholarship by the ascendancy of scholarly inquiry into race and gender questions (1-4). It is in this climate of class erasure that the film *Margaret's Museum* — as a cultural artefact, and an artefact of mass culture — must be read.

The principle agent of class struggle, or labour resistance in *The Glace Bay Miners' Museum* is Margaret's brother Ian, while Neil Currie represents the text's resistance on the issue of nation.³ Interestingly, one of the film's major departures from the literary text was to markedly diminish the brother's stature, both literally and figuratively, so that what we find in the film is a young boy — a rather immature boy — scarcely capable of mining, and surely without the strength of character and moxy required of a union organizer, strike instigator, and leader of men (as the brother Ian appears in the novel.) Funnily enough, the film even changes the lad's name from the Scottish Ian to the English James (actually, he's only ever Jimmy in the film). If this

2. The film does allude obliquely to a strike or potential strike at two moments. In one, Neil asks Angus if he is "on the strike," to which Angus replies, "not if I can help it." Later, Mr. Campbell's daughter (renamed Marilyn for the film) tells Jimmy that "my father says the strike was started by communists." These are the only two references to a strike in the entire film, and they are glossed over without further comment.

decision to render Jimmy/Ian virtually inert as a character was not part of a strategy to diminish class as the prominent discourse of resistance — since Neil and his national concerns so clearly dominates the cinematic text — it certainly has that effect. Nevertheless, gender overshadows even nation, ultimately, as the film's dominant resistant discourse.

Sheldon Currie's observation on Margaret's "voice" will help explain this. Is the film narrated by Margaret? Literally speaking, of course, subjective camera (which might link Margaret to the film's POV) is strictly regulated by the classical system, and, in fact, in *Margaret's Museum* we find absolutely zero emphasis on Margaret's POV. True, we are supplied with ample POV shots from Margaret's subjectivity, but none more than are narrationally motivated, and none outside the classical construction of POV as being one half of the conventional shot/reverse-shot structure. This fact is crucial in determining the relative weight of Margaret's narration in *The Glace Bay Miners' Museum* and in *Margaret's Museum*. As a first-person account, everything we see of the events in the novel is through Margaret's "eyes," while in the film, everything we see is through the conventional invisible "narrator's" eyes.

Realist films, as we know, must, and successfully do, efface narration. Transparency and invisibility are the terms used to describe the narrational properties of realist cinema, which is: "omniscient, highly communicative, almost never self-conscious, almost never acknowledging its own address to the audience" (Bordwell 29). One implication of this for texts which may hope to transcend the ideological constrictions of the form itself — that is, for texts which hope to offer resistance — must be that narration itself as a mode of "didacticism" (to use Foley's term) is lost as a possibility. Margaret does not tell the story in *Margaret's Museum*, while in the novel, she clearly does.

So what? Foley notes that, according to narratologist Gérard Genette, "story is, in purely linguistic terms...objective," discourse is subjective in that it denotes language expressing the opinions and attitudes of some subject" (265). After explaining the centrality of "redundancy" in narrative story-telling to didacticism (a condition which Bordwell also explicitly notes as necessary to the classical Hollywood cinema, 21), Foley remarks,

since "discourse" comprises a broad range of features of narrative, redundancies between "story" and "discourse" take a variety of forms. The most obvious of these is commentary issuing from a narrational voice. Any narrator who delivers a running commentary...is in a strong position to influence the reader's response to characters and events (269-70).

In the absence of this commentary, Margaret's corporeal body, her very presence, by default, becomes the film's core, while Margaret's story of class resistance (told in her voice) remains the novel's.

The "shock ending" of the film has typically been read by reviewers as an angry political gesture, one provoked by, in the words of one critic, "corporate callousness and greed" (Matthews 50). I have tried to show here how this may have been a large part of the motivation for Margaret's deed in the novel *The Glace Bay Miners' Museum*, but that the film *Margaret's Museum* is much less interested in the exploitation of workers by corporate capital.

Instead — consider the obvious repercussions of the title change — the film is a far, far, more personal story — a fact which by no means renders Margaret's seemingly-deranged act unpolitical. Rather, by necessarily shifting the emphasis of the text's resistance to the personal, *Margaret's Museum* can arguably be seen as enacting the classic feminist stance: the personal is the political in some realms and on some levels. After all, the theme of gender resistance is key to both texts, just emphasized in the cinematic one.⁴ For further evidence of this conclusion, one could point to the film's very first sequence: it seems perhaps narratively irrelevant and even extraneous that young Margaret should be shown humiliated by a boy in a pretend rape, until one considers what light this scene casts on Margaret's bloody deed. It is the humiliation and exploitation caused predominantly by Margaret's gender, rather than her by her class or her heritage which, the film, because of the tendencies of the form, instinctively emphasizes. This conclusion may seem paradoxical — that even though Margaret personally narrates the novel, it is the film which must emphasize personal resistance — but the stories and discourses of film and novel must be considered both separately, and in comparison to, one another.

Finally, as if it need be stated, the "tendency" of the realist film is surely exaggerated by the profit motive. In remarks to *Take One*, *Margaret's Museum's* director Mort Ransen complained that, "it isn't a level playing field in Canada and the only way you can draw attention to your film is to hire a high-profile cast. It's almost impossible to score at the box-office without stars" (Randoja 30). This is usually true, and, despite the fact that it is possible to imagine a hit film about strikes and exploited workers, Ransen's observation speaks directly to the tendency of the film industry's "enormous resources" to influence story and discourse.

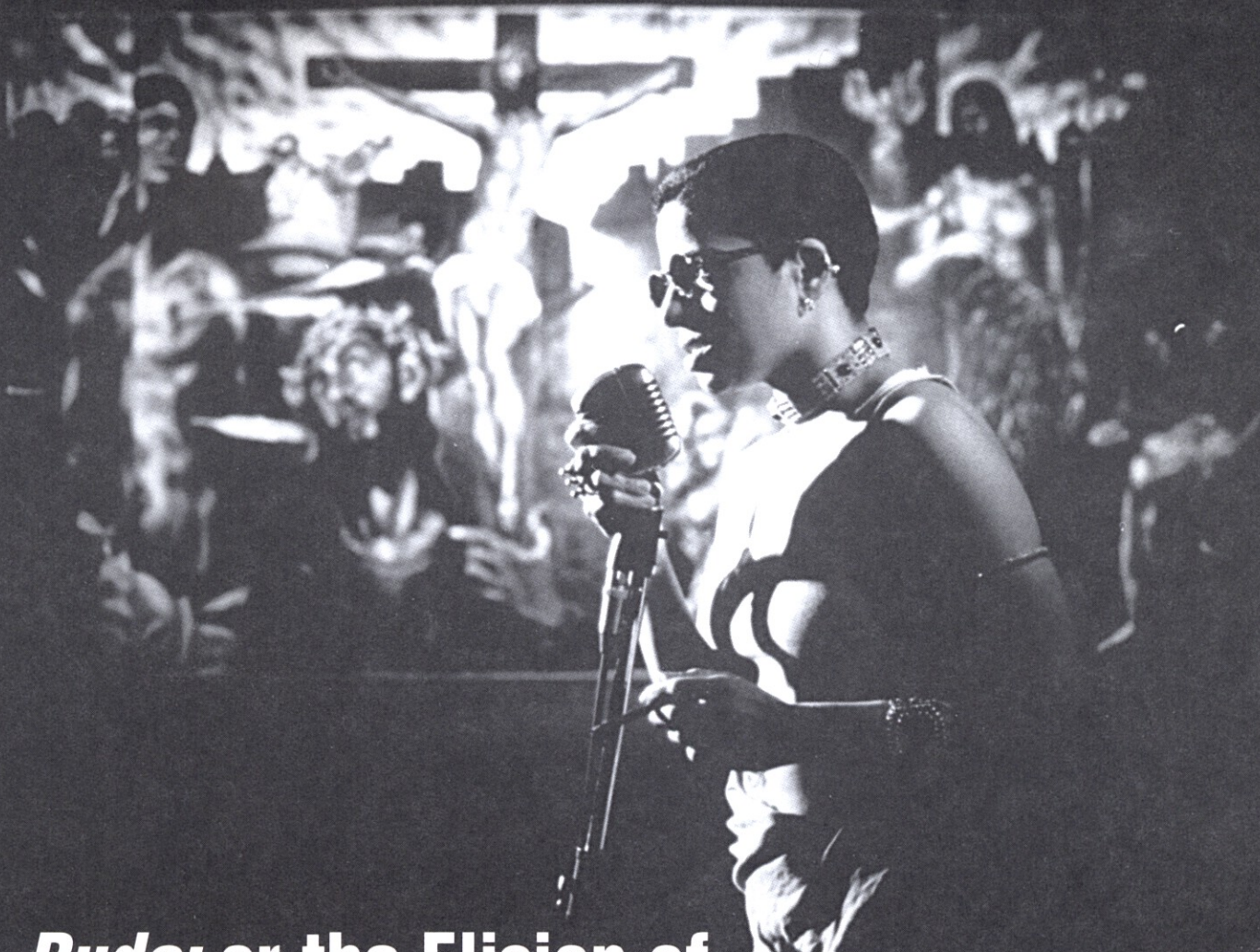
3. Throughout both novel and film, Neil makes repeated references to his heritage, and to that of his fellow Cape Bretoners, evoking the Battle of Culloden, "our language, our music," 1745, the Isle of Skye, and so on.

4. The gendered specificity of Margaret's experience as observer and agent is clearly central to both texts, which each turn on the fact that women were excluded from mine work, and thus live to tell the story.

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***Rude;* or the Elision of Class in Canadian Movies**

by John McCullough

Towards the end of Clement Virgo's first feature film *Rude*, Luke (Maurice Dean Wint) confronts his brother Reece (Clark Johnson), wrestles for possession of a gun and, in a mix of emotions, asks: "When are we going to grow up, Reece; when do we become men?". Reece has no answers, Luke has nothing further to add and disappears into the night, and the audience can quite safely assume that there is nothing more to this sibling encounter. Or, the unanswered question can be read as one of the themes which ties the three stories of *Rude* together. If *Rude* is "steeped in the hood film genre," as Rinaldo Walcott argues, then the question ("when do we become men?") seems appropriate.¹ But the film is barely interested in representing the rites of passages or the sustained realistic portrayals which distinguish many U.S. "hood films". Clearly the film is not about young men becoming adults. The significance of this question in a U.S. black film lies in the very fact that almost half of ghetto-born males never reach the age of adulthood. In Canada, that social statistic is not what inspires

1. Rinaldo Walcott, *Black Like Who?* (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 1997), pp.53-69.



Luke. Rather, his question seems related to the broader topic of gender relations and the search for and recovery of male power and identity in the context of multiple gradients of colonized identity. In this sense, the question is more akin to the types of questions Frantz Fanon asked and answered about identity and post-colonial subjectivity.

It is also worth noting that the question which Luke asks is a familiar one within the history of the Canadian feature fiction film. To the extent that it suggests immaturity and underdevelopment it relates to the anxiety of being "little brother," the "silent subject," the "loser" and the "victim" which are all designations that have been applied to most male characters in Canadian movies and to the Canadian fiction film itself.² That is to say that the question "when do we become men?" could be asked of all the males, for example, in *Goin' Down The Road*, *The Rowdyman*, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, *Porky's*, *Videodrome*, *Dead Ringers*, *Loyalties*, *Family Viewing*, *Highway 61*, *South of Warawa* and *Careful* in ways that would not be as appropriate or as useful if asked of male characters in American films. The assertiveness of the U.S. film hero is legion and has always impressed viewers worldwide: by contrast, the hesitant attitude of Luke and Reece seems typically Canadian. Within the film, itself, the relation between the men (they are never boys) and their boss, Yankee (Stephen Shellen), is similarly

structured such that their existence is mere fodder for (the) Yankee who expresses his desires, plans and character forcefully and repeatedly. The name he gives Luke, for instance, is General which refers specifically to Luke's role as head of the Canadian operation of Yankee's drug empire but the process of naming is thoroughly indicative of the boss's appropriation and control over his workers. The final irony is that only in name could Luke assume the rank of General in Yankee's empire: his ultimate lack of power stands as a precisely-positioned comment on the role of branch-plant capitalism which has defined Canada's relations with the U.S..

But as much as the film may articulate Canadian insecurities and take a shot at U.S. hegemony *Rude* is not a strident nationalist project — in fact, it is difficult to see it as much more than an entry into the respectable tradition of Canadian art cinema. In this sense, the film assumes a privileged place alongside the work of Atom Egoyan, John Greyson, Srinivas Krishna, Bruce MacDonald, Guy Madden, Deepa Mehta, Lea Pool and Mina Shum. It is distinguished by its technical beauty, the imaginative interweaving of three distinct narratives and its believable and well-rendered characters. Walcott observes that "Virgo's cinematic virtuosity is clearly playful, and sometimes reveals a diasporic sensibility" and Peter Harcourt enthusiastically claims that *Rude* is "the crowning achievement of the new Canadian cinema."³



The three stories in *Rude* are based on the Judeo-Christian theme of redemption and they take place over Easter weekend. Although the film refers to Caribbean immigrant and black Canadian experience in Toronto the actual place of the film is highly metaphoric. Most of the interiors use painted flats as walls or partial sets (eg. the dj's space is signified by a console and some equipment) and the only documentary-like footage in the film consists of a few shots of the Regent Park projects which lie east of the city's downtown. Other than this, the city is designated as Babylon, the symbolic site of Western oppression and decadence (a concept which the film borrows from Rastafarian cosmology). Additionally, pixillated long shots of urban spaces and horizons serve as segues between the stories. The overall effect of Virgo's visual design is to emphasize the universal theme of rebirth at the expense of useful references to a real Toronto and real neighbourhoods and communities. In fact, Virgo's attempt to universalize his story extends to the trope of the pirate radio dj, Rude (Sharon M. Lewis), whose presence in the ether is the only site which suggests linkage between the stories. As used in *Born In Flames* and *Young Soul Rebels* and *Rude* pirate radio serves to suggest community (because pirate radio assumes a committed and local audience) as well as displacement (because this is a community maintained in the ether).

The formal aesthetic of *Rude* is somewhat unique, then, in the history of Canadian film. Its urban subject-matter and its emphasis on symbolic meaning is contrary to the documentary roots of Canadian film wherein the natural environment and realism seem to be privileged. This difference has inspired Harcourt to describe the style of the film as "hyperrealist" and, more cautiously, as "magic realism". Walcott has a more negative evaluation of Virgo's aesthetics but he does see *Rude's* style as associated with black diasporic cultural practice. Specifically, the use of repetition, the use of music as a commentator on the characters and action and the foregrounding of oral traditions in the character of Rude, principally, are all associated with techniques recognized by Clyde Taylor and developed later by

2. For a recent exchange regarding these topics refer to Christine Ramsay, "Canadian Narrative Cinema from the Margins: 'The Nation' and Masculinity in *Goin' Down the Road*," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, Vol.2 Nos 2-3, 1993, pp.27-29 and Chris Byford, "Highway 61 Revisited," *CineAction* 45, February 1998, p.10-17. I would add to Ramsay's overview of characterization in Canadian movies Seth Feldman's "The silent Subject of English Canadian Film" from his anthology *Take Two: A Tribute to Film in Canada*, (Toronto: Irwin, 1984).

3. Peter Harcourt, "Faces Changing Colour Changing Canon: Shifting cultural Foci within Contemporary Canadian Cinema," *CineAction* 45, February 1998, pp.2-9. For elaboration on this perspective and an interview with Virgo see Marc Glassman, "Where Zulus Meet Mohawks," *Take One* Vol.9, Fall 1995, pp.16-21.



Manthia Diawara as common rhetorical figures in black film aesthetics.⁴

Given all of this, it is not surprising that the film, while referring to what appears to be real-life scenarios, communicates to the viewer on a somewhat abstract or conceptual level. The concept of redemption, for instance, is played-out in all three of the narratives. Luke moves from confused and disempowered ex-con through conscious resistance to Yankee and finally towards freedom from Yankee in the embrace of his family. Maxine (Rachael Crawford), for her part, is initially represented as the resistant but captured prey of her lover's camera (a gift he bought her) who achieves a sorrow-stained independence by which she has come to terms with both her lost love and their child, which she has chosen to abort. Jordan (Robert Chevolleau), the boxer who has been involved in a gay-bashing but who is clearly gay-identified, has moved beyond the violence which attends repression and, when we last see him, he accepts punishment for his complicity with the bashing or "lynching" as the film describes it. The redemptive transcendence involved in all these stories is thoroughly problematized, though, to the extent that traces of the real world cling to all the characters. Luke's wife Jessica (Melanie Nicholls-King), the police-officer who shoots Yankee, may or may not be infected with HIV contracted from an errant needle in the process of doing her job. Maxine is portrayed as co-existing with the spirit of her dead daughter and as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* reveal this is a heavy burden to bear as the reproduction of black culture within the winds of the diaspora resides in the continuity of daughters. As for Jordan, his weekend transformation suggests that his world has now been turned irrevocably upside-down. The portrayal of Jordan seems to borrow from some of the thesis on repression embedded in Scorsese's *Raging Bull* in which the boxer's violent homophobia is the 'logical' outcome of a disavowed homoerotic desire which becomes projected hostilely toward the object of that desire. In the bashing scene, Jordan denies his own desires and this allows him to deliver the knock-out punch but, later, after being confronted by his victim and embracing his 'trainer' (both wonderfully-evoked instances of the "return of the repressed") Jordan becomes fully submissive and accepts his punishment. In Virgo's weekend, as the sun and moon skim the horizon and interchange their roles, Jordan moves from sadist to masochist. With these reflections in mind it is difficult to fully agree with Walcott when he claims that *Rude* "fails to register the kind of politics of transfiguration that allows folks to think what they have not before thought." While limited in its aspirations, *Rude* seems to be a film that does have the power to make people think about some things differently, if not radically.

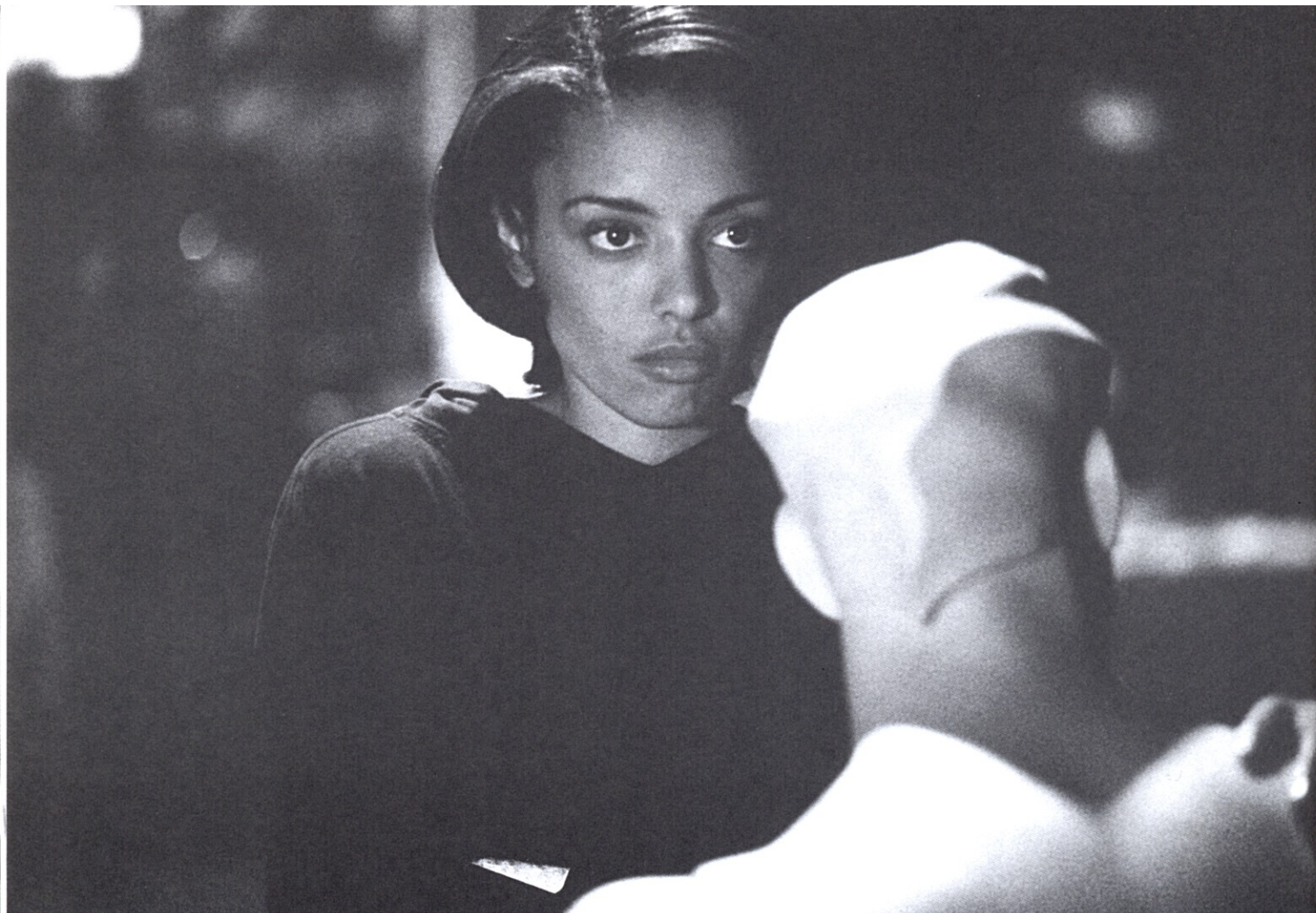
Part of the film's success as a story about redemption is that it clearly offers itself up as a mythic tale. There is little realism in the film and this suggests that its effects lie not in its verisimilitude but in its storytelling. This draws *Rude* fully within the Canadian film canon, as it is recognized by Harcourt and Ramsay, to the extent that its narrative structure is visual, connotative, contemplative and finds its exemplary form in the fable which "implies more than it says."⁵ Measured by the standards of realism *Rude* seems to fail miserably: we never learn much about the characters or their situation beyond what is

schematically crucial for the story. But *Rude* is powerful as a fable about missed opportunity and the chance to repeat, differently. One might argue that this is potentially Brechtian filmmaking (ie. artifice foregrounded, mythic/epic structure, overlapping stories and themes) but, contrary to Brecht, the alterity which Virgo presents is not revolutionary but, in fact, wholly mute on the concept of revolution. In this sense, Walcott's objection to what he terms the "socio-religious narrative" is particularly insightful.

The key to this silence lies in the recurrent repression or elision, in Canadian narrative film generally, of class relations by the more vague and more easily-assimilated concept of national identity. For instance, Luke's principle foe is Yankee, the white drug lord, who works with "people in the States"; he is aggressive, competitive and racist. His denunciation within the narrative is premised on his identity as a threat. But, by his name, the source of his threat is assumed to be American. There is no shortage of this trope in the Canadian canon and it has been regularly used to obscure class relations which exist in this country. Undoubtedly, branch-plant identities are woven within the national fabric but the figure of the venal American does nothing to clarify this branch-plant or colonial identity let alone initiate a discussion of the effects of the class struggle within Canada. Yankee is not so much a boss, in the film, as he is a spectre of U.S. imperial reach. This is fine as far as it goes but it allows the tactful avoidance of class-based questions which could investigate the relation between bosses and workers, male workers and female workers, white bosses and workers of colour, the Canadian state and the Canadian business elite, the migrant worker and the immigrant worker and so on. It is easy to see how many dynamic stories of enormous social import are jettisoned when the national question is given priority in the construction of cultural product. While each of these class-based scenarios would open onto a wealth of particular relations *Rude*'s specific stories are in place to confirm general and vapid concepts. Furthermore, representations which play to international hostility assume the dubious claim of consensus around the concept of nationhood and assume that, for instance, women, people of colour and workers (and owners for that matter) on this side of the border have nothing in common with their counterparts on the other side. Additionally, the conception of Yankee as universally repugnant on the basis of collective Canadian hostility to the U.S., generally, diminishes the significant regionalist and national differences which constitute this nation.

Walcott's general dislike of *Rude* is based on the film's evasion of the topic of the body which is central to discussion of black identity and race generally. I am indebted to this critique of body-evasion and would like to extend it to the evasion of bodies as regards work and class. It is not as though working bodies in *Rude* are not visible — all the main characters are workers and producers. Jessica, for instance, is a police officer and is potentially injured in a job-related accident. Maxine works as a

4. Clyde Taylor, "Decolonizing The Image: New U.S. Black Cinema" in P. Stevens, ed. *Jump Cut* (Toronto: BTL Press, 1985), pp.166-178 and Manthia Diawara, "Black Amercian Cinema: The New Realism" in Diawara, ed. *Black Amercian Cinema* (NY: Routledge, 1993) pp.405-427. 5. Ramsay, p.39 and Peter Harcourt, "Introduction," in S. Feldman and J.Nelson, eds. *Canadian Film Reader* (Toronto: Peter Martin, 1977), p.376.



window-dresser, presumably, but her job seems significant only to extent that, at the height of her crisis, she destroys her tools just as Jordan (who has been told that his fists are his "tools") injures his hands in a fit of self-flagellation. In each instance, the body becomes a site of destruction, not in the context of capitalist relations, but on the road to moral conversion. The effective disappearance of the classed body, as a story topic, is an effect of the narrative of redemption and this is aligned, principally in Luke's story (which is the dominant narrative), with the ideology of nationhood and national identity. In the film there are a number of occasions when work and class are suggested as prominent social realities. When Luke turns down Yankee's offer he does so to avoid losing Jessica and his son. This is a potentially powerful evocation of a complex theme: the role of working-class family solidarity in the face of invasive capitalist greed. Furthermore, this series of events implies that, in capitalism, work and love are rarely compatible and neither work nor love is the guarantor of the other. But this is not what the film says: instead, it wishes to solve Luke's sense of emasculation by demonizing the drug-dealing Yankee, not by critiquing capitalism, and so it asserts that there is a difference between Yankee as drug-dealer and Yankee as capitalist. The nastiness which Yankee gets up to, which includes injecting customers with contaminants, kidnapping Luke's son by tempting him with treats which his father cannot afford and humiliating his workers with racist slurs, is set within a narrative schematic (the moralistic

fable) which encourages reading Yankee as a metaphor for America. It is as metaphor-for-America that the role of Yankee as owner/employer is eclipsed. Class relations within Canadian film are regularly obscured in this way; this implies, though, that feature film in Canada is organized by class *as an absence*.

Byford suggests, in re-evaluating *Goin' Down The Road*, that such an absence has also led to significant critical blind-spots which have tended to misread class relations and identities in the Canadian film canon. This insight could also be extended generally to critical approaches to contemporary Canadian films. Atom Egoyan's work, in particular, has received many critical accolades and it is worthwhile to recall that his films have always privileged the metaphysical over the materialist. To the extent that much of his early work features the role of technology within the everyday, critics have been quick to associate this with the theme of "technological nationalism" and this has perpetuated a conception of nationhood which is, at one and the same time, bound to tools and defined by the ephemeral.⁶ What gets lost in this is the role of elite American and Canadian ownership of media, workers' lack of access to mass media and the overwhelming desire of ordinary Canadians for U.S. media product and not national identity. A critical approach to Canadian film which ignores this context of class conflict does not get around such matters but is unconsciously inspired to develop concepts of national identity which tend to be idealist.

For all the money and power which would affect the various real-life relations which are represented in *Rude* (eg. drug trade, boxing, male-female and adult-child relations) the film curiously suggests that money and class influence only those events in the film which are part of Luke's story. Here, then, the narrative which derives its primary influence from the U.S., the "hood film", is the one which points most clearly to class conflict. And this would suggest an interesting premise: American stories, to the extent that they are engaged in re-telling the American Dream of private acquisition of wealth, can generally be read on the basis of class analysis. In the context of the liberal state-capitalism which defines the Canadian perspective class is often marginalized by humanist tales of good and evil, winners and losers and big and little brothers, all the tropes which critics have used to describe the canon and which filmmakers have used to avoid material reality. In *Rude*, the roll of bills which passes between the customer, Yankee and Luke (and which Luke eventually returns to Yankee) is the only literal manifestation of the effects which money has in keeping all the characters living the lives they lead. Moreover, when the money appears it is only passed between men. In an earlier scene, Jessica refuses money from Reece knowing that it has come from Yankee and is thus morally-tainted. But if the film aspires to progressive gender politics (which the stories about Maxine and Jessica suggest) this is only decipherable by "reading against the grain" and thus revealing class as a structuring absence. That is to say, Maxine and Jessica have jobs and cash but their power is always supplementary to the men whose own gender identity, in turn, is related to their financial security. The men's insecurities are consistently foregrounded so the issue of their control of cash becomes a prominent element of the narratives. But this is only partially investigated by the film; the relations of gender, race and class are repeatedly simplified by the moral imperative of the film which asserts that Yankee's money is bad because he is a bad man. There is no sense that Luke's emancipation would involve critically assessing the role of money as a structure of oppression (ie. as capital). Additionally, by distancing class and money from the concerns and lives of Maxine and Jessica a cultural bias against understanding women, money and class is maintained. A good example of the negative connotations of such a thematic aporia emerge in the portrayal of Jessica as a threat to Luke because she has a job and money — in short, he is the supplement in the family. The implication is that Luke's lack of power is a result, not of capitalism, but of Jessica having a job and money.

Ultimately, the film's inability to articulate class struggle as a conscious structural element influences its choice of narrative style and method of characterization. Further, the film suggests that redemption is a matter of morality (eg. Maxine resolves her anxiety about baby and boyfriend around the ethics of choice; Luke rejects Yankee in a moral repudiation of evil; and Jordan is converted by 'just punishment') and this resonates as an idealist fantasy which equates human progress with moral evolutionism. By contrast, the tonic for what ails everyone in *Rude* is the redemption of human existence by way of class revolution. By this, I mean to draw attention to the fact that if class conflict was recognized in this film then the characters' stories would evolve towards consciousness and not moral transcendence. As

it is, Luke, Maxine, Jessica and Jordan are reborn but ultimately they are bound to repeat their oppression in class society for they have not realized how it orders their existence. When *Rude* says that this story takes place in the land where the "Zulu nation meets the Mohawk nation" this should be a call to radically challenge capitalism, colonialism and imperialism. But, by not pursuing this sentiment, the statement seems flippant and can ultimately serve as a justification for state-sanctioned multiculturalism (one can see the tourism poster already). If *Rude* was a radical film it would lead, in Walter Benjamin's phrase, "into a world that borders not only on the tombs of the Sacred Heart or altars of the Virgin, but also on the morning before a battle or after a victory."⁷

Rude is a paradigmatic contemporary Canadian movie and given that its structure is consistent with the tradition of Canadian art cinema, in particular, it can be provisionally argued that the theme of nationhood (however it appears) in Canadian films consistently serves to obscure material realities of life actually lived in Canada. Under the banner of national culture the most grievous forms of injustice and inequality are perpetuated in the relations between genders, races and classes. It is to *Rude's* credit that these relations are part of its story (even if obscured) but it is necessary to consider the manner by which class suffers obliteration in the face of cultural nationalism. There is no doubt a significant and rich relationship which ties class to nation but the use of representational codings and cultural shorthand (eg. hostility to Yankee becomes synonymous with moral and national rectitude) to address this relationship has obvious pitfalls. If Yankee is to be hated, and by extension the U.S., let it be done not as a national duty but as an expression of class antagonism against owners, first, and then the imperialist U.S. state which reaches everywhere including the hearts and minds of many Canadians. And if the spirit dancer who graces the opening and closing of the film is to be admired then let it be done not as multiculturalist genuflection but in a moment of recognition of the ancestors on whose bones the Canadian nation treads. A radical national cinema would expose and narrativize the class struggle which structures everyday relations and inspires the liberal state apparatus to fund culture which consciously or unconsciously points southward as the source of all social problems and heavenward for solutions. To take up Luke's question, and to inflect it by way of Marx, men will come to know themselves only after the passing of class society.

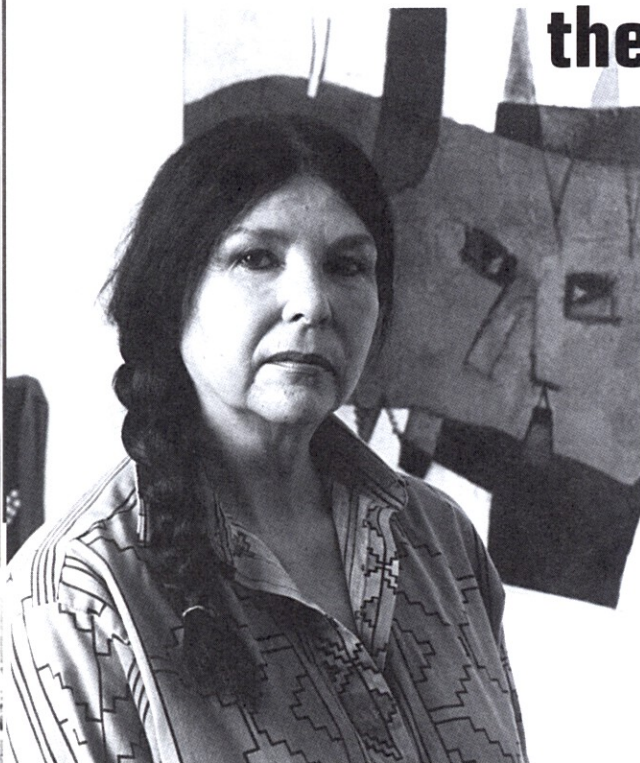
6. Maurice Charland, "Technological Nationalism," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Volume X, No.1-2, 1986 pp.196-220. Charland concludes: "A technologically-mediated Canadian culture, based in the experience of media commodifications, would contribute little to a Canadian self-understanding." (217). Typical of many Canadian critics' responses to Egoyan's work is Cameron Bailey's essay "Scanning Egoyan," *CineAction* 16, Spring 1989, pp.45-51. Bailey opens his essay with the claim that "Technology is Canada's alphabet, our first and last resort." While Bailey is careful to avoid technological determinism, his approach tends to reiterate a common Canadian critical approach to media, which is borrowed from Innis, McLuhan and Kroker, which sees Canada as held together by technology.

7. Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism," *Illuminations* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1973).

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Alanis Obomsawin, Documentary Form and the Canadian Nation(s)

by Jerry White



Alanis Obomsawin

Why, one might reasonably ask, are Alanis Obomsawin's film so important? Isn't she just an old NFB hand, making straightforward, sometimes pedagogical documentaries that will mostly wind up in schools and public libraries? Indeed she is, and that's precisely why her work is among the most vibrant and organically political in Canadian cinema. She is a true social filmmaker: in an age where the NFB is abandoning

its traditional mission in favor of commercial film models and independent Canadian cinema looks more and more to the derivative, self-indulgent trust-fund filmmaking of the USA for inspiration, she remains a model of commitment.

Obomsawin's films have a very ambiguous relationship with the aesthetics and ideology of that most Canadian of genres, the documentary film. Formally, they appear quite utilitarian, eschewing either Errol-Morris-esque flourishes or the studied objectivity of direct cinema, or its American bastard child, *cinéma vérité*. Ideologically, her work seems to be something of a corrective to the National Film Board of Canada's (NFB) exclusion of native subjectivity, a rejection of the Canadian Film/Cinéma Québécois split that has marked film north of the 49th parallel. And yet, there is also a way in which Obomsawin's films embody the very essence of a Griersonian¹ ethic of filmmaking, an ethic which has been cinematically enunciated both in French and English but which has very infrequently realized its promises. Further, Obomsawin, especially in her most famous film, *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, offers a substantial, biting critique of the way in which nationhood is defined, which is an especially important point of dissent in a country like Canada, which prides itself on the looseness and



diversity of its national identity. Overall, these are complex, critical works, which balance the needs of a utilitarian, educational cinema with the larger political project of native self-determination, and this balance of priorities, both of them totally removed from a production/consumption idea of cinema, constitutes a radically revisionist film practice.

That Obomsawin's films engage so directly in a dialogue with the NFB idea of filmmaking is hardly surprising given her status as staff director there, although it is also important to understand how she came to that job. In 1967 she was working as an activist in several native communities in Québec, and was hired as a consultant to a film produced by the NFB about just this kind of organizing. She found she liked the experience, and began making NFB filmstrips about native life for schoolkids, eventually learning 16mm production and moving into her own documentary film projects. She was, in 1967, already well known as a singer, songwriter, poet and storyteller, but the move into filmmaking was an easy one for her, a new way to pursue her ongoing work. Furthermore, the educational work in which she had been engaged as an activist could clearly be continued through her interest in filmmaking. This kind of educational work, she says, "was to reach the children and the students at the university level to talk about and tell our history and our own stories. When I was asked to come to the film board it was really for the same reason."² The importance of this personnel matter (that she was

asked to come to the NFB "for the same reason" as she was asked to perform in schools) cannot be understated. For Obomsawin, there is no meaningful distinction between her lives as a singer/performer, activist, or filmmaker: they are part of the same lifelong project.

It may seem somewhat perverse to embark upon an analysis of as oppositional a filmmaker as Obomsawin along Griersonian lines, given the disrepute into which his legacy has recently fallen. There's been no shortage of critiques of Grierson in recent years,³ most of which locate him and his institutional legacy as solidly

1. John Grierson was, as a surprisingly small number of Canadians seem to know, the first head of the National Film Board and former head of the film units of the U.K.'s Empire Marketing Board (EMB) and the General Post Office (GPO). One of his first statements on the possibilities of Canadian film was a manifesto called "A Film Policy for Canada," liberally quoted in this article, originally published in the 15 June 1944 issue of *Canadian Affairs* and reprinted in Douglas Fetherling, ed. *Documents in Canadian Film* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1986), 51-67.

2. Interview with the author, 18 February 1997.

3. See, for example, Scott Forsyth, "The Failures of Nationalism and Documentary: Grierson and Gouzenko," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 1:1 (1990); Seth Feldman, "Re-thinking Grierson: The Ideology of John Grierson," in Pierre Véronneau, Michael Dorland and Feldman, eds. *Dialogue: Cinema canadien et québécois / Canadian and Québec Cinema* (Montréal: Mediatexte/Cinémathèque Québécois, 1986), 21-56; or Sandra Gathercole, "The Best Film Policy this Country Never Had," in Seth Feldman, ed. *Take Two: A Tribute to Film in Canada* (Toronto: Irwin, 1984), 36-46.



Kanehsatake:
270 Years of
Resistance

neo-conservative. Nevertheless, he enunciated very clearly, and at a very early stage in Canada's film history, an ethic that emphasized a distinctly non-commercial character for an emergent Canadian national cinema. This legacy — or, more accurately, the tragically unfulfilled possibility of what Grierson wanted to accomplish — hangs heavy over the NFB. The idealism that the legacy represents must not be ignored because Grierson himself too often veered into the realm of the technocratic or elitist. The way in which he and the institutions he put in place sought to re-define the role film plays in its viewers' lives has not been forgotten by many documentarians, least of all Obomsawin. "The non-theatrical audience is today being organized on a vast scale in all progressive countries," he writes. "It represents a revolution in the film industry."⁴ Cinematically, Obomsawin is a child of this revolution, having adopted a decidedly non-theatrical exhibition practice.

Indeed, both Grierson and Obomsawin clearly agree with Chuck Kleinhans' belief that "[u]nderstanding documentary as 'complete' only when seen and reacted to shifts the maker's goals from producing a perfect, whole, comprehensive work to producing a work with new values and new designs, which will make it viable, interesting and educational for a longer time."⁵ This kind of practice was important to Grierson, and he writes approvingly that "[w]herever people are gathered together in the name of a specialized professional or social or civic or educational interest, there you have a ready-made audience for films which are devoted to their needs and interests."⁶ The ability of a film to meet specific social needs and effect people's lives was just as important to Grierson as any concerns about production values. Obomsawin echoes this desire for the film to have a non-theatrical life when she notes in an interview that

I was very pleased when the Alberta government bought the rights for the film [*Richard Cardinal: Cry from the Diary of a Métis Child*]. Many social workers in different departments see it now. One time I was in Edmonton for the premiere of *No Address* and a man who had been the provincial Ombudsman presented me with two reports, saying that the Richard Cardinal film had helped force new policies and laws in Alberta.

Speaking of the changes to the welfare laws that were spurred by her film *No Address*, she notes that "[t]his is why I make these films. To go for changes."⁷ This seems entirely consistent both with Grierson's understanding of film's possibilities to engage with civic life and Kleinhans' insistence that a film is not finished until it's discussed and used. Obomsawin serves as a much-needed bridge between traditions of social/pedagogical and political/agitational documentary: her Griersonian sensibilities should not be downplayed simply because Grierson has fallen into disrepute in many academic circles.

I. Form: Making the Most of the Least

"Making short films which deal with reality and are based on actual observation does not involve the same vast technical equipment, the same immense variety of skills, the same names, the same demand for big salaries. When it comes to

education — and I mean education in a live and real sense which I have described — our country can be as fervent and imaginative as any other."

— John Grierson, "A Film Policy for Canada."⁸

One aspect of Obomsawin's cinema that quickly distinguishes it from her contemporaries is its oddly pared down form. Her work displays little in the way of stylistic flourish or excess, and usually features explanatory voice-overs that might remind some of dull, pedagogical (NFB?) documentaries of the 1950s. However, what's important to keep in mind about this apparently simple aesthetic is that it is peppered with a pronounced subjectivity. Further, Obomsawin's work displays a tendency towards lyricism and massive narrative digressions, both techniques which shatter conventions of documentary realism. Her films should be placed in a very different cultural location than most NFB production, one that's ultimately more consistent with other aboriginal media projects than with most conventional documentary. And yet, there are even parts of this latter project which seem decidedly out of place in the Obomsawin corpus: many of her formal choices make her seem like too much of a maverick even for aboriginal media. Like her ideological concerns, Obomsawin's formal decisions are decidedly independent, failing to clearly parrot any predetermined formula.

Describing her style, Obomsawin has said that "I like to make it as plain as possible, so that the attention has to be on the work and what the people are saying... I don't like to do fancy things where your attention is on other things."⁹ This is especially true of her earlier work: films like *Le Patro*, *Le Provost* (1991) or *Poundmaker's Lodge* (1987) make for fine examples. These two portraits of institutions (*Le Patro*, *Le Provost* about a Montréal day care center, *Poundmaker's Lodge* about an alcoholic recovery center just outside St. Albert, Alberta) are comprised mostly of images of the organizations' work accompanied by an explanatory voice over by Obomsawin and interviews with people who run the organizations and people who benefit from them. They look, in short, very much like countless other NFB documentaries, except they are about Native institutions run by Native people, and have Natives speaking for themselves, uninterrupted. This uninteruptedness is an especially important part of her form, actually, because it has a way of slowing the films down (people are allowed to complete thoughts, even when they are awkwardly phrased or take a long time to get out), and what this minimal manipulation ends up doing is determining the film's pace quite self-consciously. Even when they look straightforwardly pedagogical, Obomsawin's films break with rhetorical norms of documentary, such as focus or concision. It's clear, just as she says, that she wants your attention to be on what the people are saying: that her films feel a little slow and rambling and formally very pared down is a

4. Fetherling, p.63.

5. Chuck Kleinhans, "Forms, Politics, Makers, and Contexts: Basic Issues for a Theory of Radical Political Documentary," in Thomas Waugh, ed. *Show Us Life: Towards a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984), p.336.

6. Fetherling, p.62-63.

7. Both quotes from Peter Steven, *Brink of Reality: New Canadian Documentary Film and Video* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1993), pp. 182 and 185, respectively.

8. Fetherling, p.67.

9. Interview with the author, 18 February 1997.



Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance



Incident at Restigouche



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Even though she draws on a semi-minimalist form, Obomsawin's films are extremely subjective. This subjectivity is most clearly expressed by her own voice, which forms the soundtrack of almost all of her films. This voice over is far from the voice of God variety that has been used to convey a false objectivity: instead, it has the effect of identifying whose eyes this is all seen through. Indeed, Peter Steven has pointed out to Obomsawin that "in all of them [her films] you are present at least in the narration, and you speak as an insider. For example, in *Poundmaker's Lodge*, you refer to 'our people,' and in *No Address* you say, 'Many of our people come to Montréal.'"¹⁰ Her voice overs may echo the conventions of documentary form, but their effects are the exact opposite: they assert a very specific cultural identity rather than hide behind a faceless false objectivity.

No Address is an especially important example of subjectivity in Obomsawin's cinema. This film is about homeless Native people in Montréal, and juxtaposes the stories of several men's experience with the Montréal Native Friendship Center and the efforts on the part of a community radio station in the nearby Native community of Kanawake to raise money for homeless relief. Obomsawin combines interviews, observational-style documentary footage, especially of the work at the radio station, and semi-documentary footage of quotidian aspects of homeless life (a lot of walking around, really). It is this last element that is most important in terms of subjectivity: these semi-documentary sections usually have either music or Obomsawin's voice over explaining various problems people have when they arrive in a strange city, and do very little to contribute to any kind of narrative drive (as do, for example, the sections at the radio station, most of which follow a fund drive to its conclusion). Instead, they contribute to an awareness of the filmmaker's hand, and this awareness itself help to make it clear that this is a work not simply of objective documentation, but of intentional, agitational, and perhaps even propagandistic, activism.

Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance, also makes an interesting case study in terms of subjectivity, although less so than might be expected. The film is for the most part an observational documentary, with the key players in the 1990 siege at Oka¹¹ framed in long shot and hand-held camera work throughout. From time to time there is an interview with one of the Native rebels, and much of the observational footage has Obomsawin's voice over to explain and clarify, but none of this looks especially unusual from a formal point of view. Indeed, this seems an especially linear film, although this question of linearity is what brings some of its formal eccentricities to light.

Kanehsatake tells the story of the Oka confrontation, but it tells it *from the very beginning*, when the uprising was nothing more than a few activists blocking a dirt road, and takes it *to the very end*, with footage of the rebels being led off to jail in shackles. In between there is an enormous amount of information, from the little arguments between the leaders of the rebels and the Canadian army units, to the details of getting food back and forth across the barricades. This level of exactitude is itself exceptional, especially given the superficial and visceral way that the uprising was covered by the mainstream Canadian and Québec press. What is especially interesting from a formal point of view,

though, is the way that Obomsawin organizes this information. While she never abandons a sense of linearity (we learn about logistical problems with food, for instance, towards the end of the film, when the siege has begun to drag on and food becomes more of an issue), she peppers the film with fairly disruptive digressions, which she deems necessary to gain a full understanding of the problem. The most striking example of this comes when she is describing the negotiations taking place at a Trappist monastery: as some helicopters land behind a Sulpician church she notes on the voice over that "270 years ago, this is where the trouble began," and proceeds with an illustrated, educational-film style history lesson about French colonialism in this area and how so many of the problems anticipate the current situation. It's a startling sequence, given the way that it disrupts the linear flow of events and changes the aesthetic from hand-held, mostly observational documentary to animated, pedagogical explanation. Like the subjective elements of her other films, though, this section serves to call attention to the hand of the filmmaker, lest a viewer be lulled in by the naturalistic, sometimes jumpy documentary aesthetic that predominates.

Gilles Marsolais takes Obomsawin to task for this sequence among many other parts of her film, and while his critique is interesting in some ways, it misses what is so important about this moment. Writing in the second edition of his classic survey of documentary cinema *L'Aventure du cinéma direct revisitée*, he asserts that when Obomsawin turns to historical contextualization,

Unfortunately, the analysis becomes short and spills into gross simplification in the way it short-circuits the historical periods and omits important, inglorious armed confrontations like the Lachine massacre and the genocide of the Huron nation. This is not the place to do a history course, but historians and anthropologists who are experts in this matter contest the validity of the territorial claims that have lately been made on Québec territory by Mowhawks, who live on ancient land... Algonquin land!¹²

Indeed this is not the place to enter into a history lesson, so it seems strange that Marsolais both disputes Obomsawin's version of history and fails to cite the names of "des historiens et des anthropologues experts en la matière" (he cites a book about the Oka crisis by Robin Philipot, but mentions no actual historians or anthropologists). Leaving that aside for the time being, what seems most problematic about this line of argument is that it fails

10. Steven, p. 184.

11. The Oka uprising occurred when Natives from Kanehsatake and neighboring native communities blocked a road in protest of a plan to build a golf course on sacred land. The conflict gradually escalated, with the native protesters eventually taking up arms and the Canadian Army being called in. It concluded after a siege of over six weeks.

12. "Malheureusement, l'analyse tourne court et verse dans la simplification grossière en court-circuitant les époques et en omettant des faits d'armes importantes et peu glorieux, comme le massacre de Lachine et le génocide de la nation huronne. Ce n'est pas le lieu ici de faire un cours d'histoire, mais des historiens et des anthropologues experts en la matière contestent le bien-fondé des revendications territoriales des Mowhawks qui se sont établis tardivement sur le territoire québécois et qui habiteraient sur d'anciens territoires... algonquins!" Gilles Marsolais, *L'Aventure du cinéma direct revisitée* (Laval: Les 400 Coups, 1997), p.292-3. Translation mine, as are all that follow.

to recognize that Obomsawin is entering into an area where the historical record remains highly disputed, and is entering into it with a decidedly polemical and partisan interpretation. This is why Marsolais' failure to cite the specific historians is such a problem: in assessing the argument of Obomsawin's factuality, it would be helpful to know who her opponents are, and what ideological position they occupy. Obomsawin's ideological position is quite clear, and that clarity is a central part of what makes her arguments, "biased" though they may be, readable by a critical, engaged audience, as opposed to a passive audience willing to consume expert opinion wholesale, an audience Marsolais seems to assume.

This question of historical objectivity points to a larger complaint, which seems to be about the failure of the film to conform to a certain model of direct cinema. Marsolais summarizes his gripe against the film by writing that "Obomsawin's simplistic and demagogic approach solidifies the spectator in their prejudices, especially in the case of Québec, which is actually ahead of Canada in terms of reconciling the rights of Amerindians."¹³ This is not the place to enter into a debate about the policy of Québec towards Natives: suffice it to say that the question of Québec's policies towards Natives seems a questionable line of inquiry, since these policy matters are, by the very nature of all the relevant treaties, *federal and federal only*. The real problem with this critique is that it has no teeth: *Kanehsatake* is a partisan film, and to say that it confirms the spectator's prejudices would be like saying that the Griersonian classic *Night Mail* confirms the spectator's British patriotism. It's true, but it's not really the point. Obomsawin has said that the most important part of her making *Kanehsatake* was that "there had to be a document that came from us... That was crucial."¹⁴ Less than an attempt to be the definitive voice, *Kanehsatake* was a distinct voice, one among many, and one that, finally, would allow the people under siege and their compatriots to give their side of the story. Going so far as to call the film's approach demagogic doesn't show a very clear understanding of the uses to which Obomsawin's subjective voice is put.

Perhaps the clearest example of subjective voice in Obomsawin's cinema is *Richard Cardinal: Cry from the Diary of a Métis Child* (1986). This film follows the story of a young boy who, after being separated from his family to go into a series of horrible foster homes, eventually commits suicide. Here Obomsawin combines interview footage with re-enacted sequences, using young actor Cory Swan to play the part of Richard Cardinal. The dramatic sequences are themselves fairly minimal and mostly lyrical (Richard playing in the woods, sitting at home, etc.) but are nevertheless striking for their violation of the codes of documentary realism. Further, the film's enormous emotional impact represents an important violation of objectivity: Obomsawin makes it quite clear, both in her choices of what interviews to include in the film and more explicitly in her voice over, that this was a horrible tragedy that could have been prevented by conscientious oversight. It too is very self-conscious work of activism, and its activist character is perhaps best proven by the fact that the furor it caused when it came out was instrumental in the reform of Alberta's child welfare laws in the 1980s. This furor, however, can at least partially be ascribed to her formal choices: through these re-enacted sections she gives the film something of the emotional impact of melodrama, an impact

which, unlike the monological representation typical of Hollywood, she tempers with very long sections of interview and voice over, which attempt to give some deep context for the emotion. This balance, between clear, detailed understanding and emotional force, is perhaps the characterizing feature of Obomsawin's aesthetic.

The meanings of the word "aesthetic" have been the subject of fierce debate in aboriginal media circles, as many activists have found film and video a useful tool in organizing, even though they may remain uninterested in more strictly formal matters. This itself echoes a Griersonian idea of production, given that many aboriginal media groups seem to be focusing on forms that privilege that Griersonian favorite, "education." Furthermore, a good deal of aboriginal media work has been focused on training people to make their own films and video by way of countering imposed representations of their lives (this is especially true of native film and video in Canada's far north). There is certainly a way in which Obomsawin's didactic, pedagogical and utilitarian form could be ascribed to her declarations that her aspirations are primarily educational, as opposed to aesthetic. Faye Ginsburg has summarized these points, writing about Australian aboriginal media that:

In order to open a new "discursive space" for indigenous media that respects and understands them on their own terms, it is important to attend to the *process* of production and reception. Analysis needs to focus less on the formal qualities of film and video and more on the cultural *mediations* that occur through film and video works.¹⁵

Applied to Obomsawin's work, such an interpretive strategy might focus on her insistence on showing these films at public meetings and in Native communities as a stimulus to discussion, on her use of subjectivity to put a Native voice forward, and on her non-intrusive interview style which allows Native people to speak clearly and at length. All of these aesthetic qualities may be violations of convention, but make perfect sense in the context of an ongoing project to record, explain and indeed mediate Native Canadian culture.

And yet, like understanding early NFB films (such as those of the equally celebrated and criticized B-Unit) solely as works of nation building education/propaganda, there is something about this kind of analysis that feels incomplete when applied to Obomsawin's work. Many of her films, especially *Richard Cardinal* and her early series of *Vignettes* (a group of one minute films that portray various aspects of quotidian life in the Arctic) have a pronounced lyrical sensibility to them that is at odds with a strictly pedagogical function and is closer to developments in recent experimental documentary, particularly the group of films that Bill Nichols has identified as "performative documentary." He sums up this genre as one that "stress(es) subjective aspects of a classically objective discourse."¹⁶ It's important to acknowledge that Nichols' examples for this form are primarily very avant garde films (such as Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* or Trinh Minh-ha's *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*), films that seem to be much more formally adventurous than Obomsawin's work. However, what we can see in Obomsawin's films is a refusal to acknowledge where the "documentation" ends and the "recreation" or "agitation"



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begins. This blurriness is on display in films as different as *Kanehsatake* (which sometimes features candid-eye moments followed by images with Obomsawin's passionate voice-over) and *No Address* (which features obviously staged moments of people hanging around the streets with actual homeless men, who we have seen earlier in the film, on the voice over)

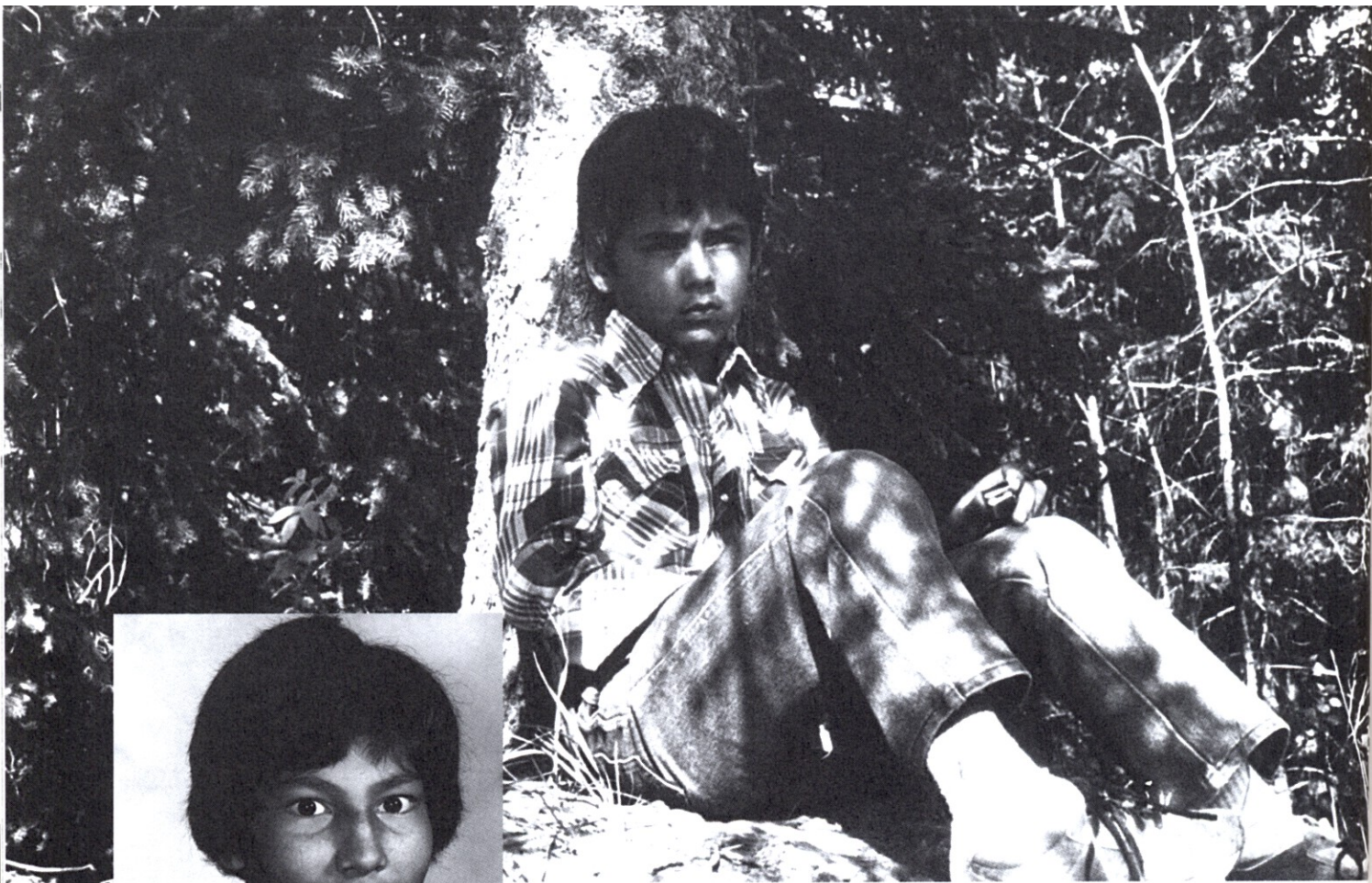
The clearest illustration of Obomsawin's non-narrative, elliptical documentary ethic is visible in the films that came out of *Kanehsatake*. Obomsawin shot hundreds of hours of footage for

13. "Cette approche simplistique et démagogique d'Obomsawin confirme le spectateur dans ses préjugés, notamment à l'endroit de Québec, alors que celui-ci est plutôt à l'avant garde au Canada pour la reconnaissance des droits des Amérindiens." Marsolais, p.293.

14. Interview with the author, 18 February 1997.

15. Faye Ginsburg, "Mediating Culture: Indigenous Media, Ethnographic Film, and the Production of Identity." In Leslie Devereaux and Roger Hillman, eds. *Fields of Vision: Essays in Film Studies, Visual Anthropology and Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p.259

16. Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p.95.



Richard Cardinal: Cry from the Diary of a Métis Child

this film, and of course found herself unable to use it all, and therefore unable to tell all the stories that interested her.¹⁷ She partially solved this problem by making two more featurettes (each about 50 minutes), *My Name is Kahenttiosta* (1996) and *Spudwrench: Kanawake Man* (1997), each a fairly in-depth portrait of one Oka rebel who we come to know in *Kanehsatake*. *Kahenttiosta* is about a woman who, after she was arrested, gave her name as Kahenttiosta instead of the "Canadian name" demanded by the court. She was detained several extra days as a result, and Obomsawin mixes documentary footage, interviews, court drawings and kids' drawings (a device she also used in her 1976 film *Christmas at Moose Factory*) to describe the prejudices and injustices of Canada's legal system.

Spudwrench is a very different film, diverting considerably from the topic of the Oka uprising. Instead, it is a portrait of Randy Horne (whose codename during the Oka uprising was SpudWrench), who lives in Kahnawake, Québec as an iron worker on high bridges and buildings. The film ends up being more about the ironworking profession (practiced by many native men for several generations) and the activism and community organizing that takes place as a matter of everyday life in Kahnawake. She said that she "wanted to show more people from the community, but also I wanted to show the contribution those people

have made for so many generations in terms of building bridges and buildings all around the world. It really is an important thing, since they've been at it since 1867!"¹⁸ This has not very much to do with Oka as such, and indeed the uprising is mentioned only at the end of the film, almost in an offhanded way. It was our land, Horne says, yeah sure I'd do it again. Rather than a simple explanation of part of Oka crisis, which would still be part of an essentially linear/narrative documentary form, the *Spudwrench* film is a complete digression from that topic, but still linked to the longer *Kanehsatake* film. It's an almost autonomous, quite non-narrative portrait of a community, a portrait that is launched via the experiences of one man (which happen to include the Oka uprising): following Nichols, it stress(es) subjective aspects of a classically objective discourse.

Perhaps the central point of contact between Nichols and Obomsawin can be seen via a third party, the French ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch. In discussing performative documentary, Nichols insists on the centrality of "(t)he ethnopoetics of Jean Rouch, who has consistently argued for, and embodied, a style of filmmaking that does not so much as combine the subjective and objective poles of traditional ethnography as sublate them into a distinct form."¹⁹ This distinct form that Rouch lays down could be reasonably described in the terms I have earlier

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used for Obomsawin: a balance between clear, detailed understanding and emotional force. A key example of this is Rouch's 1960 classic *Chronicle of a Summer*, in which he applies cine-ethnographic methods to his own community, Paris, and then shows the footage to those who he recorded, getting their feelings about how they were represented. Obomsawin, like Rouch, wants to involve her participants in the making of the documentary, and in both filmmakers' *œuvres* the subjectivity of both the filmmaker and the subjects of the film are centralized. This has the effect of blurring the differences between the two, complicating notions of authorship and finally emerging as a deeply hybridized form, a form that seems equally at home and out of place in both the universe of the NFB and in the world of Aboriginal media (a socio-cultural world that's not all that far from the NFB, given its concern with social utility and low budget production).

Even though Obomsawin's films seem simple and straightforward formally, they actually represent a significant transformation of documentary aesthetics, although still essentially within the framework of a Griersonian idea of form. She takes what she finds valuable from the Canadian tradition of documentary (low budget production, fusion of as opposed to choice between interviews, observational techniques, and voice over) and adds that which she needs for her activist project (emphasis that this is her speaking in the voice over, that these films are foremost for "our people," secure in the knowledge of who that is). The mixture of forms associated with such contradictory impulses as nation-building and activism/agitation looks a little strange on first glance. When the films are considered together, and in the context of Obomsawin's activist priority, the sheer consistency of her aesthetic mixture makes it clear that these films occupy a complex social and cultural space.

II. Ideology: Qu'est-ce qu'un Nation?

"...every year we make hundreds of short films which describe the life of the nation. They describe Canada's achievements in industry and agriculture. They go into the various problems of finance and housing and labor and nutrition and child welfare. They progressively cover the whole field of civic interest: what Canadians need to know and think about if they are going to do best by Canada and by themselves."

— John Grierson, "A Film Policy for Canada."²⁰

Obomsawin's contribution to an analysis of Canadian nationhood is just as important as her transformation of the Canadian documentary tradition. All of her films, on a certain level, communicate an interest in working towards a cohesive First Nation, as we have seen through her use of terms like "our people" in her voice overs. However, her two films which deal with confrontations with governmental forces, *Incident at Restigouche* (1984) and *Kanehsatake*, offer radical critiques of the way that nationhood has been constructed by Canadian and Québec society. This critical voice is entirely organic with her hybridized documentary form: Obomsawin is not rejecting the concept of nation *per se*, but is instead insisting that *her* nation is just as legitimate and deserving of self-determination as the Canadian or Québec nations.

Benedict Anderson has famously defined a nation as an "imag-

ined community," and this image of imagining tells us a great deal about the way that Obomsawin constructs her Native community. Her films contribute, in a way that very few other films have, to an *image* of, as Anderson writes, "a deep, horizontal comradeship."²¹ This kind of comradeship is visualized both through the familiarity that her voice-overs imply and in the way that she frames her analysis. She works not through a class or gender analysis, or even through a truly ethnic analysis (for she has very little to say about similar problems faced by other non-members of Canada's white élite), instead looking at a very specific ethnic group in every film. *No Address* and *Richard Cardinal* are much more about the specifics of the native situation than they are about the way that the society of the oppressor deals with its oppressed. A crucial part of the analysis of the problem in *No Address* is that many of the people who become homeless wind up that way because the shock of coming from a small, tightly knit Native community to a huge, impersonal city is too overwhelming. Similarly, *Richard Cardinal*'s tragic energy comes mostly from the fact that this young boy has been forcefully placed into a foster home, and so into a way of life utterly alien to him. This is a part of the Canadian experience that is reasonably identified as specific to the Native community, and would not support an analysis that centralizes class or gender. Obomsawin's films, because they deal with situations that centralize the experience of a very specific group of people (whose similarities may or may not be imagined, *pace* Anderson), have the thematic consistency of a national cinema. Denise Pérusse's insight that she "makes known the dress and traditions of aboriginals, gives voice to them and puts an Amerindian gaze onto her times"²² is arguably what distinguishes her as a filmmaker interested in constructing a nation: through a set of common signs and situations, Obomsawin makes it clear who she is speaking about. Her films are about Natives' place in North America, in much the same way that Grierson makes it clear that his NFB will "describe Canada's place in the world."²³

That said, what has brought Obomsawin the widest attention is her challenges to the dominant national structures, a challenge she first launched with *Incident at Restigouche*. This film follows the confrontation in 1981 between Mic'Mac warriors and the Sûreté du Québec over fishing rights. Much of the film is comprised of footage of the blockades and confrontations (some of which is cut to fast-paced French folk music about the standoff), although Obomsawin regularly breaks from this narrative momentum to show a long interview she did with Québec's Fisheries Minister. At one point she aggressively challenges his

17. A big part of why she was able to film such a large amount of footage was because the NFB allowed her almost unlimited amounts of film stock, a fairly unusual situation in documentary filmmaking. Because she has been allowed these kinds of resources, she always speaks well of the NFB, noting that "it's really the only place where you can make the type of films that I do. It would be pretty hard in the private sector to make these kinds of films" (18 August interview).

18. Interview with the author, 12 January 1998.

19. Nichols, p.103.

20. Fetherling, p.64.

21. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), p.7.

22. "Elle fait connaître les coutumes et traditions des autochtones, donne la parole aux siens et pose un regard amérindien sur son temps." "Alanis Obomsawin," in Michel Coulombe and Marcel Jean, eds. *Le dictionnaire du cinéma québécois* (Montréal: Boreal, 1991), p.400.

23. "A Film Policy For Canada," in Fetherling, p.64.

narrow view of who has self-determination on this land, and she makes it clear that this blindness to native sovereignty is a major problem for the separatist Parti Québécois, at that time in power and so responsible for sending in the SQ to raid what they perceived to be illegal fishing. This tense interview, rightly famous, serves as a kind of a schema for her view of the problems of the dominant nationalisms of Canada: both in Québec and in Canada, even when the concept of nation and self-determination is at the forefront of political discussion (as it certainly was in 1981, and as it always is for the PQ), the right of aboriginal people to self-determination is beyond the scope of the discourse.

This schema is given fuller realization in *Kanehsatake*, a film whose analysis is based in an illustration that much of the conflict was about different ideas of nationhood. For example, there is footage in the film of a Mexican native trying to perform a ritual on one of the tanks, and Obomsawin makes it very clear that many of the people who came to Oka to support the rebels were from the United States. In this context, a shot of a U.S. flag with a native's face emblazoned upon it, a flag that was displayed at one of the camps for Oka supporters, takes on a very different meaning than in a conventionally "Canadian" context. For Obomsawin and those who were there supporting the rebels, it is a symbol of solidarity and pan-nationalism, as opposed to imperialism. Further, she shows an interview with Brian Mulroney, who scoffs that some of the troublemakers at Oka "are not even Canadian citizens." Including this shot has the effect of making Mulroney seem arrogant in the extreme, clearly someone who does not understand anything except the most narrow view of nation. Obomsawin also shows images of a goodly number of people who, resisting the brutal and often totalitarian treatment by the SQ, yell out that this shouldn't be happening here because "this is Canada!" Obomsawin ends up showing that the violent conflict between differing definitions of "Canada" proves that the federalist myth of many nations peacefully co-existing in a benevolent Canadian state is indeed an illusion, one that can come violently unraveled given the right brew of conditions.

That this film is a critique of *federalism* seems to me crucial: this is not an assessment that is always shared. Indeed, when my (mostly western-Canadian) students watch *Kanehsatake*, their responses tend to be along the lines of "those nasty Québécois, they want sovereignty for themselves but not for the aboriginals. They are indeed the small minded hypocrites we always suspected they were." There are lots of problems with this analysis, of course, but the primary one is that the government in power during the Oka crisis was not the PQ, but the *Liberals*. The provincial leader who presides over the madness is not the sovereigntist Jacques Parizeau but that grand old man of Québec federalism, Robert Bourassa. To say the least, this throws a wrench into the argument that this is a critique of Québec separatism (which is certainly not so say that Obomsawin isn't critical of that movement since she castigates the PQ Fisheries Minister so harshly in *Incident at Restigouche*). Indeed, it is all too easy for English Canadians to read the film as such, while understanding the film as an angry, powerful critique of the supposed solution to Québec separatism, Federalism, is a bitter pill to swallow.

She continues this complication of nationhood, although in a much more subtle and less fiery way, in *Spudwrench: Kanawake*

Man. The film is a very detailed portrait of the ironworking trade, and Obomsawin goes into some detail about how the jobs took these men all over Québec, Canada and the United States. It's very clear that the national identity of the people in this trade, like most of the people in Kanawake, has very little to do with any of these imagined communities. Instead, they have a somewhat unconventional (by English Canadian or Québec standards) but still very fully realized sense of community which can be reasonably understood as national self. Obomsawin illustrates this by considerable documentation of how the social fabric of Kanawake is centered around keeping Native traditions alive and relevant. Although it is a fairly impressionistic, often lyrical portrait, *Spudwrench* offer just as revisionist an idea of nationhood as does *Incident at Restigouche* or *Kanehsatake*.

Following Grierson, it seems reasonable to say that Obomsawin makes films about the life of the nation. His belief that films should illustrate "what Canadians need to know and think about if they are going to do best by Canada and by themselves" is a fair summary of her project, she just has a very different idea of what "Canada" is. Her films complicate the national self, and in so forcefully putting forth images of (or an imagining of) a different kind of nation and demanding that it be given an equal place at the table, she disrupts some very basic assumptions about Canadian life.

III. Grierson, our contemporary...

Understanding Obomsawin as a seminal Griersonian filmmaker presents a delicious irony. She clearly shares his ideas about a socially useful cinema, and her practices have illustrated this idealism better than just about any other NFB productions. Formally her films are as didactic and polemic as any Griersonian-era film on either side of the Atlantic: *No Address* shares a great deal with the EMB documentary *Drifters* (1929), and a fascination with industrial practices and national life can be seen in both the EMB *Industrial Britain* (1932) and *Spudwrench*. Where she differs from Grierson's conservative view of nation is obvious, though, and her passionate advocacy of Native self-determination would have certainly troubled that respectable Scotsman. Nevertheless, it seems imprudent to throw out the Griersonian baby with the bathwater: Grierson has his ideological problems, but he contributed a great deal to the definition of Canadian film along the line of social rather than commercial practice. It is this definition that has allowed Obomsawin to make her decidedly non-commercial films and remain secure at the NFB, and however else Griersonian idealism may have failed to materialize, she serves as a potent realization of its possibilities.

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Everybody Has His Reasons

John Sayles's *City of Hope* and *Lone Star*

by Michael Walker

John Sayles began as a writer, publishing two novels — *Pride of the Bimbos* (1975) and *Union Dues* (1977) — and a collection of short stories: *The Anarchist's Convention and Other Stories* (1979). He also wrote scripts for Roger Corman's New World (e.g. *Piranha* (1979), *Lady in Red* (1979) and *Battle Beyond the Stars* (1980), and made his debut as a writer-director with the very low budget *Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1979), filmed on 16mm. for a total production budget of \$125,000.¹ He continued to write genre scripts to support himself, whilst making his own personal movies in parallel. In 1982, he made *Baby It's You* for a Hollywood major. Interviewed in *Cineaste*, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the experience: "that's the last time I want to go into a situation where I don't contractually have final cut."²

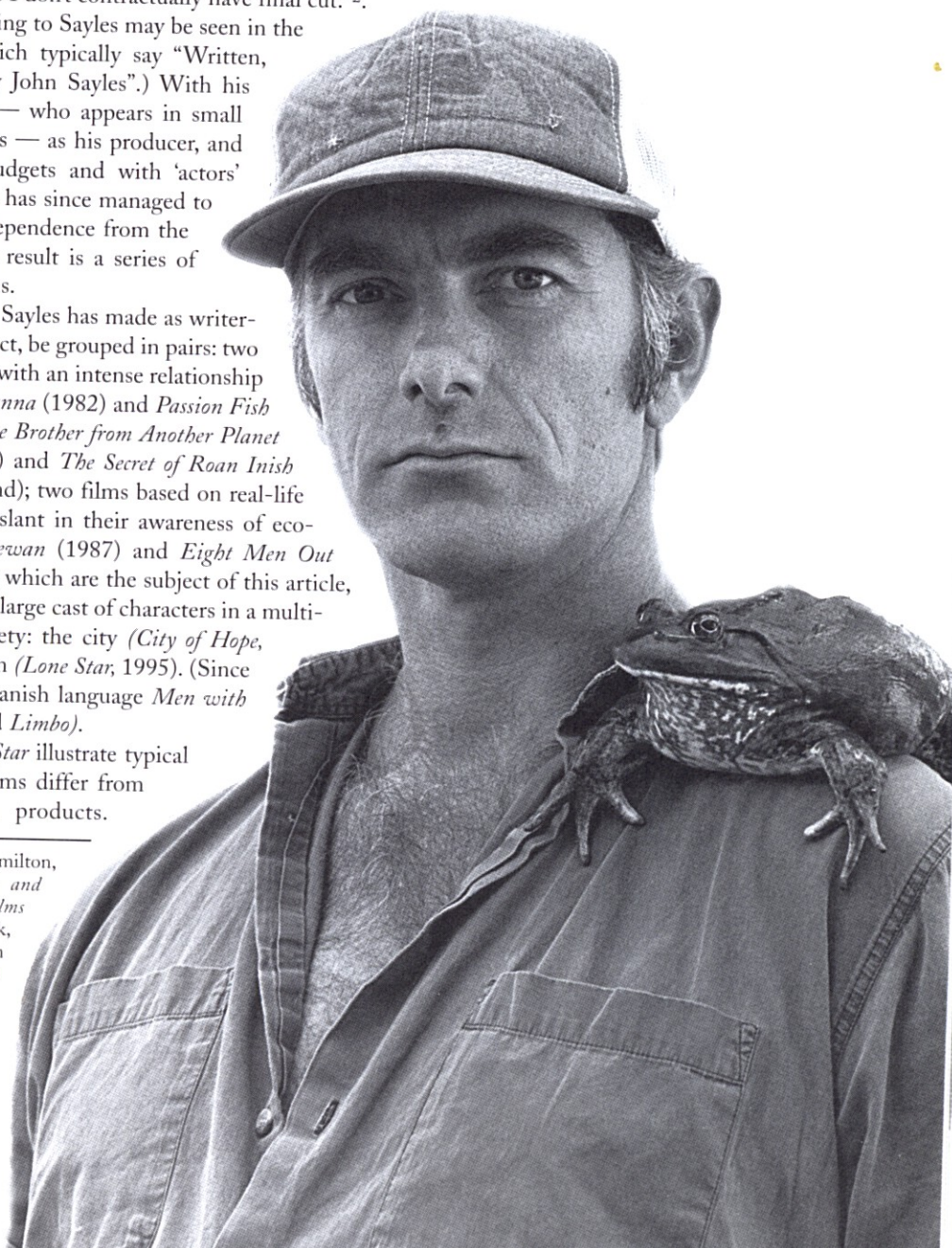
(The importance of editing to Sayles may be seen in the credits to his films which typically say "Written, Directed and Edited by John Sayles".) With his partner, Maggie Renzi — who appears in small roles in most of his films — as his producer, and by working to tight budgets and with 'actors' rather than 'stars', Sayles has since managed to maintain his artistic independence from the Hollywood system. The result is a series of unusually distinctive films.

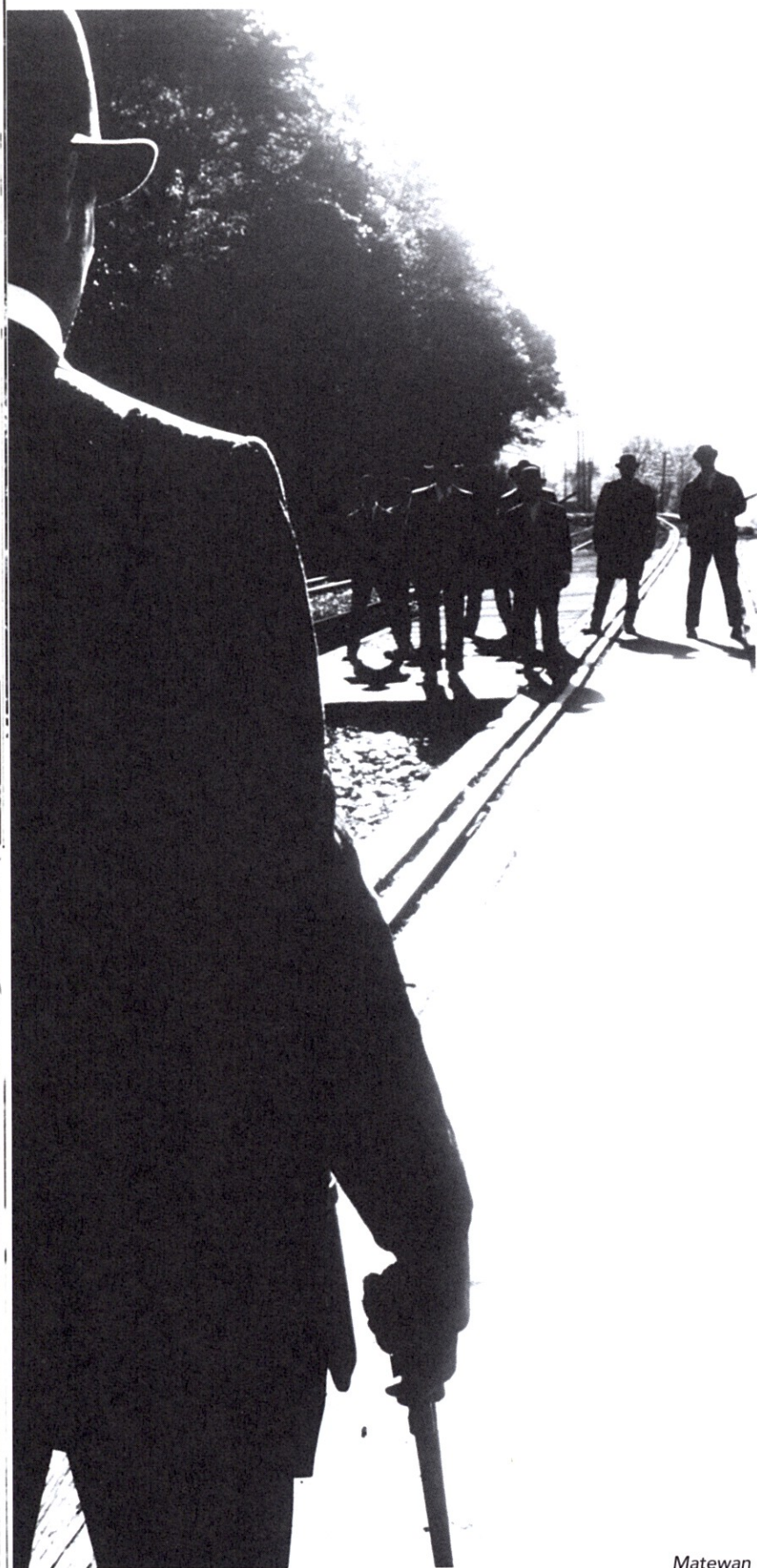
The other eight films Sayles has made as writer-director to date may, in fact, be grouped in pairs: two small-scale films dealing with an intense relationship between two women: *Lianna* (1982) and *Passion Fish* (1992); two fantasies: *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984) (sci fi in Harlem) and *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1993) (folk-tale in Ireland); two films based on real-life incidents given a Sayles slant in their awareness of economic exploitation: *Matewan* (1987) and *Eight Men Out* (1988), and the two films which are the subject of this article, both of which deal with a large cast of characters in a multi-cultural, multi-racial society: the city (*City of Hope*, 1991) and the border town (*Lone Star*, 1995). (Since then, Sayles made the Spanish language *Men with Guns* and the just-released *Limbo*).

City of Hope and *Lone Star* illustrate typical ways in which Sayles's films differ from mainstream Hollywood products.

1. David Posen with Peter Hamilton, *Off-Hollywood: The Making and Marketing of Independent Films* (Grove Weidenfeld, New York, 1990) contains full production details of the making of *Return of the Secaucus Seven*.

2. John Sayles interviewed by Daniel Popkin: *Cineaste* Vol XIII No 1 (September 1983), p 40.





Matewan

Both show the interaction of the political and the personal, and depict a complex weave of character interaction across a social cross-section of their respective societies. Whereas most mainstream films develop only the main characters in any psychological depth, and resort increasingly to stereotyping as one moves down the cast list, in these films there is an attempt to understand all the characters and their behaviour. *City of Hope* arguably goes further in this deviation from the norm. In it there are over forty characters given significant speaking roles, but the film offers neither a clear identification figure nor a comfortable position from which to view the events in the narrative; all the characters who have any power, and many who don't, are shown to be compromised. The other modern director whose work is perhaps closest to this is Robert Altman; *Short Cuts* (1993), for example, has a similar city-based network and number of characters. But Altman's position towards his characters seems to me fundamentally misanthropic: almost everyone is unpleasant, or selfish, or both. Although Sayles is quite prepared to criticize his characters, his wish also to understand them leads to a strong sense, in Jean Renoir's famous phrase from *La Règle du Jeu* (1939), that "everybody has his reasons". Inevitably, some characters are crooks and some are aggressive and unsympathetic, but ultimately it's the system, not the people, which is indicted.

Stylistically, *City of Hope* is dominated by long takes — many of over a minute; some of several minutes — which are used to weave the different characters and narrative strands of the film together. The opening shot, for example, introduces three of the major characters (Nick, Joe and Wynn) and two of the minor (Yoyo and Riggs) in a take of two mins. 45 secs. But Sayles doesn't use the technique simply to introduce and link the characters, but (in this example) to condense key issues. In his capacity as councilman, Wynn is attempting to get Joe, a building contractor, to take on black workers, but Joe is resisting, citing the 'no show' guys he is already obliged to carry. However, he neglects to mention that one of these is his son, Nick, who has just walked by after quitting his job in frustration at its uselessness. Nick, in his turn, has just said to the foreman Riggs that he hasn't the balls to stand up to Joe projecting onto Riggs his own inability to confront his father. Nick, we discover later, blames his father for driving his older brother Tony into the marines and to Vietnam, where he was killed. But a truer account of this past event emerges at the end of the film, when Nick learns that Tony, involved in a serious hit-and-run accident, ran away, and expected Joe to take care of things. Joe says: "I offered him a choice: it was the service or jail." Reading the beginning of the film in the light of this, we can see that, in quitting his job, Nick, like his brother in the past, is 'running away' from his problems, and Joe, in his failure to communicate with Nick, is repeating his failure with Tony. The first two takes both end with Joe fruitlessly in pursuit of Nick, which introduces a motif which will echo through the

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film: only in the final scene, when they return to the same building site and the truth come out, do father and son reconcile their misunderstandings about one another.

Whilst the opening shot has a density of meaning which is only fully apparent in retrospect, Sayles uses the long take at other times essentially as a device to suggest how interwoven the lives of the characters are. A typical example occurs a few scenes into the film, with a take which begins on a TV showing a commercial in a shop window, where the words mouthed by the man in the commercial are unnervingly being spoken by a man watching it from the street. The man is Asteroid, the film's seemingly ubiquitous schizophrenic vagrant, whose disassociated monologues seem to be mainly a repetition of what he hears: here he is imitating Mad Anthony doing his commercial. Again the appositeness of the introduction (Asteroid behaving as if Mad Anthony were controlling him from the TV set; the literal disassociation of image and speech as a metaphor of his condition) is only apparent in retrospect. But Sayles swiftly moves on; the camera pans past Asteroid to pick up Wynn as he walks by (Wynn is in fact on his way to Mad Anthony's store), and continues into a track behind him down the street. But as Wynn passes a group of people walking in the opposite direction, the camera shifts to follow them, moving back the way it came. Two women, Connie and Joann, are complaining about what's happened to the neighbourhood to the two cops we'll be seeing most of, Bauer and Rizzo. The camera tracks laterally with these four characters, now revealing the rundown stores in the background, and the take continues up to the point when the two cops, having escaped into their car, complain in turn about the women.

Here Sayles is self-consciously drawing attention to the constructedness of the narrative. The most persistent narrative motif throughout the film is the way in which the characters' lives repeatedly cross one another: There are dozens of occasions when, as here, the narrative moves from one set of characters to another as they pass through the same space. The film is constructed on an overall assumption: That the lives of its forty-odd characters are all interlinked. This operates at various levels: they may actually know each other, or they may be connected through others (e.g. Wynn knows Les, the teacher who is mugged, in that Les teaches in the same school as Reesha, Wynn's wife) or, as here, they may simply pass one another in the street. But the assumption is crucial to Sayles's project: that the area of the city that he focuses on (mostly downtown, in the black and Hispanic areas) is like a microcosm of the city as a whole; that its network of relationships stands in for a much wider network. Whilst it is a commonplace of the small town that 'everybody knows everybody', through the persistence of the motif of crossing-paths, Sayles suggests that, in his fictitious New Jersey city, 'everybody is inter-connected to everybody'. The long take thus functions as a trope to emphasize this, physically connecting the characters and weaving their lives together.

Superimposed on this social network is a series of competing hierarchies, each with a patriarchal figure at its head. The Italians are currently in power politically, with the figure of the convivial, corrupt Mayor Baci at the head of an administration which, driven by capitalist interests, puts profits before people. The Irish are referred to mainly in historical terms — as the first group that ran the city, ninety years ago — but the presence of

Kerrigan, still a powerful figure, recalls the Irish 'boss' whose organizational activities were crucial to the building of the American city³. Certainly, the way that Joe has preferred to deal with Kerrigan rather than Baci suggests that Kerrigan still has power — Mob money? — in terms of the construction schemes in the city and the labour force that Joe employs. And the blacks are represented by ex-Mayor Errol, whom Wynn consults in a scene which obviously parallels the one in which Joe consults Kerrigan.

In its depiction of city life as both a series of competing ethnic-political hierarchies and as a complex weave of connections between different people, *City of Hope* is highly ambitious: I know of no other film quite like it. On first viewing, an understandable reaction might be that it attempts too much: with so many characters given significant speaking parts, and with most of these characters interacting in more than one setting or environment, there's a wealth of material. A full discussion of the film would require a much more detailed approach than mine here; I merely seek to sketch in some of the film's remarkable qualities.

In *The Age of Reform*, Richard Hofstadter quotes a comment made by Andrew D. Wright in 1890 "with very few exceptions, the city governments of the United States are the worst in Christendom — the most expensive, the most inefficient and the most corrupt."⁴ *City of Hope* could be seen as returning to this issue a hundred years later — although the city is fictitious, the social issues most certainly are not — and, without the suspect comparison with other countries, suggesting that American municipal government is still a disaster. We are told that Mayor Baci is "the second most indictable mayor in the state", but the DA's assistant, Zimmer, is only prepared to threaten to use the indictable material on Baci if given a handsome bribe, which is what the representatives of big business agree in the meeting in Angela's restaurant. (In one of the film's many neat little touches, the DA himself delivers one line here and then exits, leaving the dirty work to the politically-ambitious Zimmer.) As a contractor, Joe has done his best to work with the various corrupt administrations, but they can always lean on him when they want, as Baci does when he sends Gus out with an excuse to close down the 'City of Hope' construction site and to find 'violations' in the L Street apartments. Joe claims to Nick that he resents having to "kiss up to Baci", but it's clear that, in order to keep getting the contracts, he's had little alternative. But if this suggests that Joe is mainly the victim of an inherently corrupt system, this is not the whole story. Joe is also personally criticized in his capacity as slum landlord: in the conversation at his party with his brother Pauly, we hear that he has indeed tried to get the L Street tenants out: by raising the rents, turning off the heating and not collecting the garbage. He draws the line at condoning arson, but Nick's stupidity in being involved in a bungled robbery provides precisely the leverage Baci needs to get Joe to agree to that, too. If the slum apartments are burnt down, big business will be able to go ahead with the Galaxy Towers project and Zimmer will hold off indicting Baci.

3. Mario Manieri-Elia in Giorgio Cucci et al: *The American City: From the Civil War to the New Deal* (Granada, London, 1980), p 3-5.

4. Richard Hofstadter: *The Age of Reform* (Vintage Books, New York, 1955), p 176.



City of Hope



Nevertheless, Joe seems less dishonourable than Pauly, who works for Baci and is the person who tries to get Joe to agree to the arson. Structurally, Pauly is to Baci as Zimmer is to the DA: the assistant who does the dirty work. And, when the arson results in the death of a young mother and her baby, Joe has the decency to be guilt-ridden, which Baci isn't. As Baci charms the residents in an old people's home, Joe arrives and angrily tells him that two people have died because of the two of them. Baci's cavalier indifference catches the easy manner of the corrupt politician: he's even prepared to dismiss the victims as of no importance: "Those are the kind of people accidents happen to". It's here that he delivers a little homily on America as the land of opportunity: when his grandfather got off the boat, ninety years ago, he was given a shovel, now he, Baci, runs the city. He ends saying to Joe with a smile: "America, huh?" and Sayles cuts to the young children in Laurie's class singing "America, the beautiful". This isn't just irony, it's also a pointer to what the film is seeking to construct: a parable about modern America.

At the same time as Joe, here, is confronting Baci (the only time the two men meet), Wynn is consulting Errol on the golf course. And Errol, too, delivers a little history lesson about municipal government. Speaking of his own time as mayor, he says that when he took office he was obliged to take on people who had helped him, and some of them turned out to be corrupt. It took twelve years for it all to catch up with him, but in the end the only way he could avoid indictment was to resign. The requirement that an incoming mayor provide 'jobs for the boys' is of course part and parcel of the US municipal system, acknowledged even in classical Hollywood. In *Beau James* (1956), when the real-life Jimmy Walker (Bob Hope) is elected mayor of New York, he is immediately handed a list of the appointments he is expected to make; at the end of the film, he loses office because of wholesale administrative corruption.

Kerrigan's take on the issue — when Joe goes to him at an earlier stage to get Baci off his back — provides another perspective. Joe has been seeking to keep his independence as a contractor; not to have to pay graft to those who license his projects. Kerrigan comments "That's not the way our society works, Joe. If you've got something good, first everybody on top of you gets a taste. Then you share what's left with everybody below you. We're social animals..." He goes on to advise Joe to agree to the arson: "You'll do what you have to, and the people who know, the people that count... They'll respect you for it". Sayles's point here is that the corruption is institutionalized: it's part of the system. To survive as a contractor, Joe is expected to go along with it.

Joe is paralleled with Wynn: working within the system, both have to deal with the compromises to their integrity this forces upon them. In Wynn's case, because he's a black politician, he's expected to look after the interests of 'his people' even when they're in the wrong, as the two teenagers, Tito and Desmond, are when they beat up Les, and then claim that Les tried to molest them. Levonne and Malik, associated with the P Street Community Centre, operate like a double act putting pressure on Wynn, even resenting the idea that Wynn should go to the police to hear their side of the story. In his conversation with Errol, Wynn argues "This is not about a fight with white people". Errol's reply — "It's always about that, Wynn" — summa-

rizes Wynn's problem. Politically, Wynn cannot afford to say that the boys are lying; it would jeopardize his whole political future in the community.

But, whereas Kerrigan advises Joe to give in, Errol advises Wynn to fight. With the mugging, Wynn is obliged to compromise: in going to Les and persuading him to drop the charges, he is asking Les to give in to homophobic prejudice, the very thing that Les's gay colleague Roger commended Les for resisting. But with the issue of the people made homeless by the burning down of the apartments, Wynn scores a popular triumph. When he leads a protest march to interrupt the Mayor's banquet, the film makes it clear that he is following Errol's advice: in answer to Reesha's "What are you going to do?", he uses Errol's phrase "We'll figure it out when we get there". But the problems facing Wynn are huge. At an open council meeting at which increased taxation to improve the inner city schools is debated, Wynn — an ex-teacher — makes a key speech, emphasizing something that research has long established: that unemployment, drug abuse and crime "are the highest where the people have the least education". But education of the poor is not a priority: the council vote against the increase.

Interviewed in *Cineaste* about *City of Hope*, Sayles says that, in its system of allegiances, the film echoes one of the current social tendencies throughout the world: "A breaking down into tribalism. You see it in Yugoslavia, you're going to see it in the Soviet Union and you certainly see it here. It's something that's encouraged from above, the idea that ... 'it's everybody for themselves and may the best man win'... That encourages a kind of tribalism which you see in old alliances and old tolerances breaking down, and so you get very strong movements within tribes. In *City of Hope* you see the black tribe, the Italian tribe and the police force who are always their own tribe"⁵.

The police are also figures who connect the other groups. The film's narrative is driven by two crimes which become integral to the wider political issues: the bungled robbery of Mad Anthony's by Bobby and Zip (which becomes Joe's problem, because Nick was involved as driver and goes on the run) and the mugging of Les by Tito and Desmond (which becomes Wynn's problem). In another example of the film's stress on inter-connectedness, both pairs of miscreants are brought into the precinct station at the same time. In an example of the film's equal stress on political maneuvering, by the end of the film, both victims have been persuaded to drop the charges.

But the police also have a role in prompting the second of these incidents. Tito and Desmond, walking through the streets at night, are suddenly and violently thrust up against the wall by two white cops, called "faggots" and aggressively searched. After the incident, one cop, Paddy, says to his partner Fuentes: "If you can't have respect, you settle for fear". Shortly afterwards, still smarting from the humiliation of the arbitrary attack, and seething about "white faggot-ass mother-fuckers", the two boys pick on Les, who equally just happens to be passing by, and assault him.

This is a vivid example of a typical scenario James Gilligan describes and analyses in his remarkable book *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic*⁶. A psychiatrist who has

6. James Gilligan: *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic* (Vintage Books, New York, 1997).

worked with violent prisoners in the USA for 25 years, Gilligan analyses the sources of their violence and theorizes that this is at root a response to the humiliation and shame felt by these men as a result of the way others treat or behave towards them and that, in the eyes of the perpetrator, "all violence is an attempt to achieve justice" (p 11). In effect, Tito and Desmond are trying to erase the injustice and shame of what the white cops did to them by doing the same to Les, including accusing him of being 'a faggot'. Even Paddy's words fit Gilligan's thesis: shame and humiliation are caused by lack of respect; hence the concern with whether somebody is 'dis'sing' (disrespecting) one in street gang culture. (Gilligan discusses 'respect' and 'dis'sing' pp 105-110.) John Singleton's *Boyz n The Hood* (1991) contains a very similar incident. The only time we see the young black hero Tre (Cuba Gooding Jr) become violent with rage and frustration is after a black cop has equally arbitrarily picked on him, pointing a gun in his face and threatening to shoot him. Again, the cop's words emphasize the meaning of what he's doing: "Scared now, eh? I like that".

Nor does the culpability of the police in *City of Hope* stop there. Towards the end, resentful of Nick's relationship with Angela, his ex-wife, Rizzo gets into a fight with him and shoots at him (the only shots fired in the film). He wounds him, and the film ends with Joe discovering that Nick is injured and calling out for help. In the meantime, Rizzo is picked up by Paddy and Fuentes and the latter refuses to cover for him (Nick is no longer wanted). In *Cineaste*, Sayles says that when he showed the film to "friends from New Jersey Politics", this was the one thing they didn't believe ⁷. In other words, when Sayles sought to balance the representation of the racist cops by showing them later do something honourable, but against one of their own, those who we assume know about city police refused to believe it would happen.

A figure who links the characters in another sense is Carl, who is something like the town crook, organizing both the robbery of Mad Anthony's store and the arson. Above all, Carl's role is structurally important. First, he was involved in one of the film's two key past traumatic events: the hit-and-run car accident. (The other was its long-term consequence: Tony's death in Vietnam.) Nick thinks Carl was the driver and so blames him as well as his father for the events that led to Tony's death: Carl, who still limps from the smashed leg he received, resents Tony for having run away and is unforgiving towards the Rinaldi family. But Sayles has been careful to balance matters: just as Carl bears witness to the cowardly, criminal side of Tony, so Riggs, who was with him in Vietnam, bears witness to his heroic side. In effect, the two men 'represent' Tony in the present, split into two contradictory halves.

My argument in two previous articles in *CineAction* is that, where a film possesses a 'past traumatic event', there is often the sense that the event echoes through the film's narrative until a changed set of circumstances can lead to its emotional resolution ⁸. It could be argued that this happens in a minor way in *City of Hope*: that the pattern, initiated in the opening shot, of Nick 'running away' is indeed an unconscious repetition of his brother's past. The parallel becomes stronger when Nick becomes involved in an actual crime (like Tony, as the driver) and runs away when his friends are caught. An otherwise curious detail

here — that he runs by the P Street Community Centre just after a white youth has leapt out of a car and thrown a stone through the window — fits by association, as if the breaking glass were an echo of that of the smashed car in the past. This link is then strengthened when Carl finally tells him the truth about the past car accident: Nick, refusing to believe him, assaults the windscreen of the car Carl is in, turning it into another wreck. (He is so violent here that Carl has to pull a gun on him to stop him.) The final father-son reconciliation on the building site can thus be seen as healing, by association, the unresolved trauma between Joe and Tony.

In the present, Carl is linked structurally with the more unsavoury characters in the 'non-criminal' world: like their dark alter ego. One is Zimmer. The film cues us to link the two men after an early comment by Carl that he used to fuck Zimmer's wife; he then gets Bobby and Zip to be party to a nasty charade at her expense. It is no accident that Zimmer indirectly profits from Carl's criminal activities: the robbery, because of Nick's involvement; the arson, through the bribe. Carl is also linked to O'Brien, a cop Bauer refers to as "a fucking politician". Like Carl, O'Brien moves between the criminal and non-criminal worlds, seeking to manipulate the former to his advantage: just as Carl organized the robbery, so O'Brien is the detective who sets out, not to solve it, but to use it politically as a way of ingratiating himself with Zimmer. O'Brien's conversation with Bobby and Zip in jail echoes Carl's conversation with them in his garage office: the dark, claustrophobic setting; the same subject of conversation (which includes the question of Nick's involvement in the robbery). When O'Brien and Carl finally meet, the former has little difficulty in pressuring the latter to reveal that "suspect number three" is Nick. O'Brien promptly takes this information to Zimmer, and is duly rewarded, by the end of the film, with a promotion to the DA's office.

Some of the film's structural connections are more oblique. Having seen Nick talking to Angela in the street late at night, Rizzo accosts him as he comes out of his apartment the next morning: "You did it, didn't you?" Nick, who is reading in the paper about the robbery, thinks that's what he means. But Rizzo is accusing Nick of having had sex with Angela. The ambiguity is not arbitrary, but a comment on Rizzo's thinking, which shows in his later use of Nick's involvement in the robbery to take revenge for his relationship with Angela. But, in its ambiguity, the comment also applies to Rizzo himself: he was the person responsible for immobilizing Angela's car last night, forcing her to walk home. Knowing she knew nothing about cars, he removed the distributor head: an act of petty vengeance which will cost her a lot of money — the car winds up in Carl's garage and Carl decides that they'll say they had to replace the ignition system. In other words, Rizzo was the person responsible for behaving in a spiteful way towards Angela, and he is doubtless doubly aggrieved that Nick should benefit: it's Nick who — in flight from the robbery — turns up and accompanies her home.

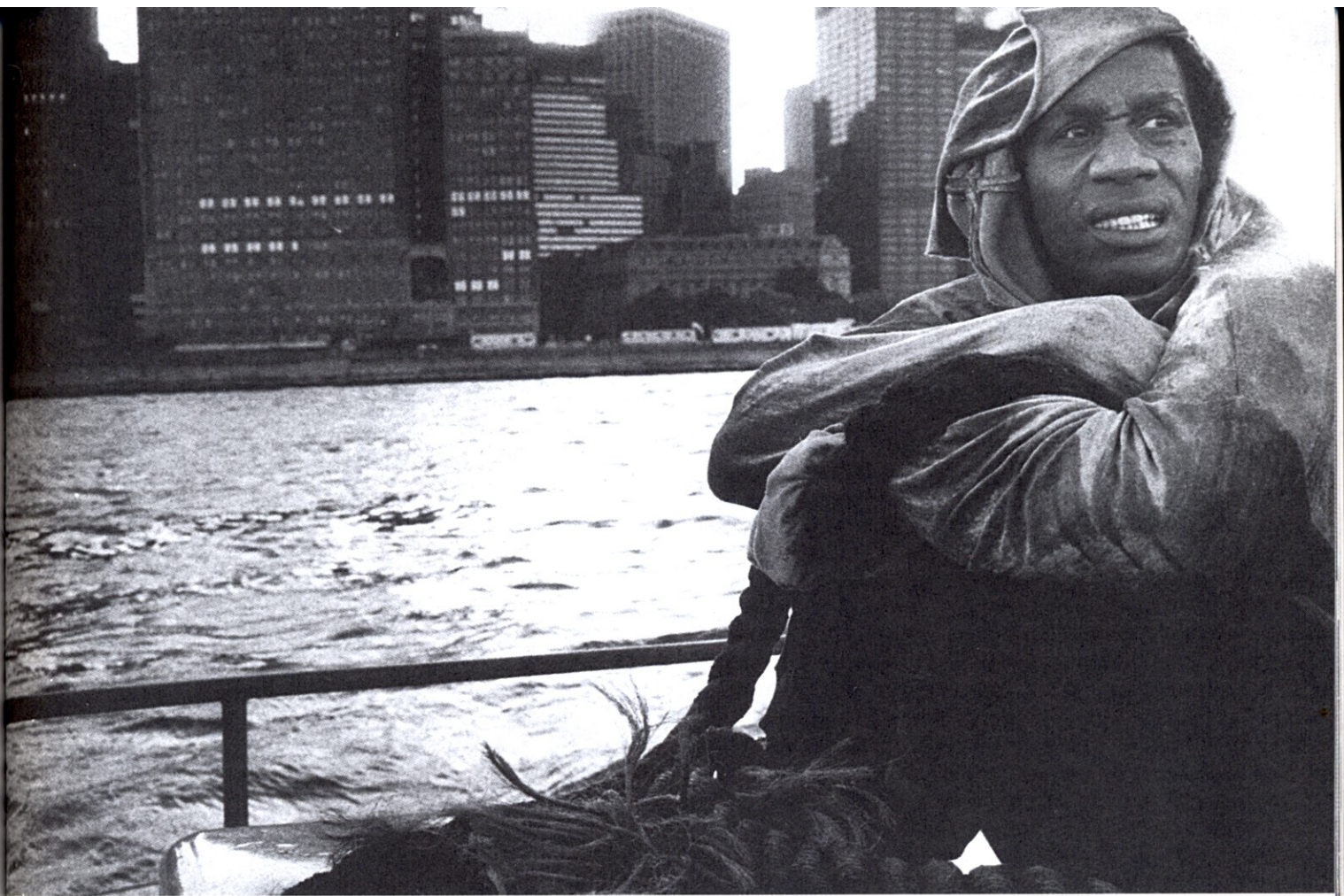
However, the film does something else here. In the next scene we see Bauer and Rizzo, Rizzo is telling Ramirez's (unnamed) girlfriend, a squatter in an abandoned part of the L Street apartments, that the building is condemned and she and her baby have to leave. And, when the building is burned down, the young woman and the baby are fatalities. Given that the fire starts



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Brother from Another Planet

whilst Nick is indeed having sex with Angela, and that Rizzo is at that moment outside her apartment no doubt suspecting this, it's as if the deaths of the woman and baby are like displacements of Rizzo's hostility towards Angela, who is also the mother of his young child.

This sort of psychoanalytic reading suggests that some of the film at least functions like melodrama, with displacement and condensation in the narrative material. This would seem to be concentrated around (a) the father-son conflict between Joe and Nick, Angela and Rizzo, with the jealous ex-husband as a sort of monster. The former thread initiates the film's action: Nick quits his job in defiance of his father (Mad Anthony is also his father's friend) and Joe's concern to protect him leads to the arson. The second thread, climaxing with Rizzo shooting Nick, brings about the film's resolution, although the ending, focusing as it does on Asteroid, the only person to hear Joe's cries for help, is bleak. In fact, after such an amazing film, I find the ending a serious let-down: Sayles abruptly removes the net-work of connections he has hitherto drawn for us and leaves us with the one person who never connects, pathetically echoing Joe's cries.

The two threads come together in the burning of the L Street apartments, the film's most overtly melodramatic scene. Joe and Nick arrive at the scene of the fire from opposite directions, their arrival coinciding with the moment when the young mother and her child are carried out. With the building blazing in the background, and the flashing lights, smoke and confusion in the fore-

ground, the scene has a powerful, elemental feel; as if the inferno stands in for the violence and destructiveness of the capitalist city. But there's also the connection to the family melodrama: as Nick looks at his father, and then at the young woman's body being rushed into an ambulance, his expression reveals that he's seeing his father as once more guilty of causing death. Again this (silent) accusation is accompanied by a lack of knowledge of the circumstances behind Joe's action; that it's on his own account that Joe has gone this far. Punctuating these events are the screams of Mrs. Ramirez, the baby's grandmother, who, as the Rinaldi's cook, had earlier (to Laurie, Nick's sister) drawn a link between their two families. The Ramirez family — hard-working mother, son wanted by the police, the son's girlfriend and baby — is like a displaced version of the Rinaldis; displaced into poverty and the slum margins of city life. And Joe is indeed responsible for the deaths: he was the landlord, but he didn't know there were squatters in that part of the building. But the police did, suggesting that Joe didn't want to know; that he pointedly overlooked the possibility. The scene ends by reinforcing the parallel between Nick and Ramirez: Nick, still wanted by the police, flees from Joe's calls; Ramirez, staying to comfort his mother, is noticed by the police, but Paddy says the warrant can

7. Sayles interview at 5, p 7.

8. Michael Walker: Melodramatic Narrative: Orphans of the Storm and The Searchers in *CineAction* 31 (Spring/Summer 1993) and Style and Narrative in Bertolucci's *The Conformist* in *CineAction* 41 (October 1996).

Salina



City of Hope

wait: "After the funeral".

Although Nick is a central character in the film, his brattish behaviour precludes our identifying with him as the 'young hero'. On the other hand, the fact that Joe has kept Nick in ignorance — and must have asked Carl to do the same — about the unsavoury details of his brother's past has obviously contributed to the hostility Nick feels towards his father. The younger brother feeling himself in the shadow of his more talented and charismatic dead older brother echoes the material in *Ordinary People* (Robert Redford, 1981). But a comparison of Conrad (Timothy Hutton), aged 18, with Nick, aged 28, shows how immature Nick is, with nothing of Conrad's agonized attempts to come to terms with the death. Both films end with a father and son embrace, but the crisis of communication between the two has been far greater in *City of Hope*, and the film fails to account for this; to explain Joe's past behaviour towards Nick.

Also rendered homeless by the fire are Desmond and his mother Jeanette. The less macho of the two teenagers, Desmond is the one the film selects to follow through to a sort of conclusion: Jeanette finally gets the truth out of him and sends him to apologize to Les. This leads to a rather improbable but nevertheless positive scene in which Desmond asks if he can accompany Les as he jogs. Les replies "It's a free country"; the same remark made by Tito when they were hassled by the cops about what they were doing downtown. In replying to Les with the same comment the cop threw back at Tito "Where'd you hear

that one?" — Desmond shows a nice touch of irony and Les laughs. Through the tentative teacher-pupil relationship established here, Sayles indicates how Desmond has matured, and — not least through Jeanette's strong influence — suggests that he may overcome the handicap of his disadvantaged background. The conflicts and resolutions within the various families in the film are primarily between the generations: it is no accident that we last see Ramirez embracing his mother and Nick his father. But *City of Hope* also contains two important brother-sister relationships. Nick and Laurie's is of a piece with the rest of the Rinaldi family melodrama: close, difficult, loving, accusatory. The childhood photographs in the Rinaldi's house suggest that they could be twins; Laurie's protest "We had a deal... After Tony died: you and me against the world" resonates with sibling yearning. But Nick's relationship with Laurie is disturbed by a powerful subtext, which is suggested by Angela's likeness to her. (They are indeed so alike students sometimes confuse them.) Does this help account for the clumsy urgency with which Nick pursues Angela before he knows anything about her — i.e. purely because of her looks? Given the ending of *Lone Star*, and the fact that the main thrust of *The Secret of Roan Inish* is a sister's quest to reclaim her lost brother, this could indeed be a specifically Sayles subtext.

The other brother-sister relationship — Reesha and Franklin — is more relaxed: although we only see them together once, the easy way Reesha handles Franklin's protests about his new uni-

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form and toy gun suggests a genuine affection. Franklin is in fact important to the mosaic of the film, in that he provides most of its humour: The scene when he catches Bobby and Zip in Mad Anthony's store is hilarious as, with perfect timing, he plays to and ironises their comic incompetence as thieves. And, when the three of them get to the precinct station, where Levonne and Malik are seeking political capital among the arrests, Franklin's encounter with Malik is wonderfully subversive. As Malik, accounting for his transformation from the person he used to be, informs Franklin "I surrendered myself to the will of Allah", Franklin ruefully responds "I surrendered myself to the will of Mad Anthony".

In its density and complexity, *City of Hope* seems to me one of the most extraordinary films of the modern era: a remarkable attempt to grapple not just with a huge canvas, but with a whole array of contemporary issues. And, after two relatively small-scale films, Sayles returned to a similar canvas with *Lone Star*, producing another brilliant and ambitious piece of work.

In *Lone Star*, the brother-sister relationship comes to the fore with a vengeance, providing one of the great, subversive endings of modern cinema. As Sam and Pilar meet at the site of the now disused drive-in where, twenty-odd years ago as teenagers, they were (to them) inexplicably torn apart, Sam tells Pilar the secret that accounts for the parental hostility to their affair: his famous dead father, Sheriff Buddy Deeds, was also her father. Whereas *City of Hope* ends with a renewal of the father-son relationship, *Lone Star* ends with a final defiance of the castrating father: even though Sam and Pilar were both Buddy's children, they resolve that this is not going to stop them continuing as lovers. Sayles makes things easier for them in that Pilar can't have any more children, but even so it's an astonishing conclusion.

Lone Star is the subject of both a detailed interview with Sayles and a thoughtful and considered analysis in *Cineaste*⁹, which reduces the points I wish to make. The auteurist connections with *City of Hope* are fairly clear: a multi-cultural, multi-racial community, each group with its spokespeople, its successes and failures; characters' lives interweaving in complex ways; conflicts between the generations; a concern with politics and the balance between corrupt power and serving the people; a sense of fairness towards most of the characters, so that, despite their flaws, we can see why they act as they do. (I will argue that film even enables us to understand the motives of the monstrous Charlie Wade, Buddy's predecessor as sheriff.) But *Lone Star* adds another dimension: a sense of history. The film begins with the discovery of the remains of Charlie Wade, killed and buried on an abandoned army rifle range almost forty years ago. As Sam, the current sheriff, begins to investigate, flashbacks to the late '50's (when Wade was sheriff) and early '70's (when Buddy was sheriff and Sam and Pilar were teenagers) are used to illustrate key events in the characters' pasts. And alongside these representations of the remembered past are references to both textbook and alternative history: Pilar is a history teacher; in a room at the back of Otis's club he's assembled a little exhibition of artifacts connected with the Payne family history.

City of Hope deals with city issues: urban development, crime, housing, race, education, and widespread political corruption. *Lone Star* is a small-town movie with more small-scale concerns:

race and education are still issues, and crime still occurs, but the extent of current political corruption is a plan to build an unnecessary new jail. The inclusion of a sense of history, however, reveals the very different state of affairs that existed in the past. Each sheriff presided over a regime: Charlie Wade's "bribes and bullets kind of sheriff" permitted any amount of illegal activity — provided he was given a cut of the action. Those who tried to get round this were shot. Buddy was more benevolent: he preferred to do deals which were mutually beneficial. Pete, busted by him for making boot-leg mescal, was perfectly happy to have served out his jail term building a patio for Buddy's house. Otis, the most influential figure in the black community, summarizes for Sam Buddy's regime: "I don't recall a prisoner ever died in your daddy's custody. I don't recall a man in this county, black, white, Mexican, who'd hesitate for a minute before they'd call on Buddy Deeds to solve a problem. More than that I wouldn't care to say". But, much to Sam's chagrin, all those who were around during this period still have nothing but praise for Buddy. A reluctant sheriff (he says to Pilar "I'm just a jailer"), Sam is very much in his father's shadow, and it galls him that Buddy was able to profit from corruption and still be respected. Like Nick Rinaldi, he's only too ready to blame his father, and in Sam's case, this takes an even more severe form: He's convinced that Buddy was the person responsible for Wade's murder.

In *Cineaste*, Sayles says "For me, very often the best metaphor for history is fathers and sons. Inheriting your cultural history, your hatreds and your alliances... is what you're supposed to get from your father in a patriarchal society"¹⁰. But, in both these films, the father-son relationships are almost Oedipal in the son's hostility. Similarly, the sense of a brother-sister alliance *against* the father is taken by Sayles in an unusually sexualized direction: like a displacement of Oedipal material. In the one flashback in *Lone Star* where we see Buddy as sheriff, he tracks down the teenage Sam and Pilar making love in a car in the drive-in. This is during a screening of the AIP movie *Black Mama, White Mama* (1972), a little nod to Sayles's exploitation-movie past. The scene on-screen shows two women fleeing across country; dogs can be heard in pursuit. Sayles links the sound of the dogs with a tracking shot of Buddy's feet as he searches amongst the cars: the association casts Buddy as the villain as surely as the flashbacks in which he appears as deputy cast him as the hero. And, when Buddy finds the young couple, he literally tears them apart: taking Sam with him and sending Pilar with his deputy Hollis back to Mercedes, her mother. Even taking account of the import of the final revelation, Buddy's repressive violence seems excessive, as if Sam were in some sense a sexual rival. Again, we could speak of 'family melodrama'. By the end of the film, Sam has learnt that Buddy was not guilty of killing Wade (Hollis was, to protect Otis), but was Mercedes' lover and Pilar's father. The parallel is loose but, as in the Oedipus legend, the hero's investigation of a murder concerning his father (as victim in the legend; as suspect here) leads to the revelation of his own incest.

Lone Star contains two further father-son relationships: Otis and Del; Del and the teenage Chet. As the Colonel recently

9. John Sayles interviewed by Dennis West and Joan M. West: review of *Lone Star* by Joan M. West and Dennis West, both in *Cineaste* Vol XXII No 3 (December 1996).

10. Sayles interview at 9, p 15.

appointed to command the army base at Fort McKenzie, Del Payne finds himself back where Otis lives, the father he's always resented because he deserted his mother when he, Del, was eight. Just as Sam is irritated by Buddy's status as town hero, so Del is irritated by Otis's similar status in the community: "Everybody loved Otis — Big O: always there with a smile, or a loan, or a free drink". But, even as Del is complaining in these terms to Celie, his wife, he is ignoring the attempts of his own son to speak to him. In this scene, Del is rushing up and down stairs moving boxes; this links to a later scene in Otis's club when he, too, is moving boxes as Chet arrives. But, unlike Del, Otis stops to give time to Chet, telling him about his ancestors: runaway slaves who joined up and intermarried with the Seminoles.

Frontera is also a border town, with a very specific set of concerns: a clash of cultures and the problem of illegal immigration. The former raises the question of what should be taught in school: at a parents-teachers meeting, there's a fierce debate between Anglos and Mexicans over the conflict of points of view on Texan history. The film then contrasts Pilar's lesson about the origins of Texas (which is full of dates) with Otis's story of the 'black Seminoles' (which is more about individuals and personal allegiances). Chet is bored during the first, but fascinated by the second, as Otis draws a parallel between their ancestors (illustrated in prints on the wall) and Del, both obliged to operate on behalf of the imperialism of the United States because they were in the army.

The remembered past also incorporates the history of the town. Although it was only in the 50s that Wade conducted his tyrannical regime of extortion and murder, it seems like the last century, when the West really was run by the law of the gun. From that point of view, the film shows the emergence of the modern small town out of its more frontier-like predecessor. For five of the film's seven flashbacks, Sayles makes an uninterrupted transition from present to past, panning from a character in the present straight to the past, without a cut or dissolve. This gives these flashbacks an unusual sense of immediacy; as if the depicted events were peculiarly vivid in the characters' memories. The first example sets the tone and suggests why: in Mercedes' café, Hollis, now the mayor, tells the oft-repeated story of the famous confrontation between Buddy and Wade on the night Wade 'disappeared'. Beginning with the camera on Hollis in the present, Sayles in effect pans into the past as Wade picks up his monthly bribe in the same café as it was in 1957. (Wade's bribe is protection money: most of the people employed in the café are 'wetbacks' — illegal immigrants.) Here the smooth transition bears testament to the familiarity and status of the story: the moment when Buddy Deeds first stood up to his then boss and so staked out his claim as town hero. But, as Sayles exits from the flashback with a similarly uninterrupted pan from Buddy in the past to Sam in the present, he emphasizes Sam's more ironic view of the matter. In a tone of voice which signals his skepticism, Sam says he supposes that, when Buddy became sheriff, he promptly set about deporting the illegal immigrants. "No" says Hollis "he come to an accommodation. Money doesn't always have to change hands to keep the wheels turning". In other words, because Buddy's "accommodation" was so much less repressive than Wade's "bribes and bullets", everybody was happy.

The illegal immigration issue is focused in particular on Mercedes. She lives near the Rio Grande, and when she sees some wetbacks early in the film she phones the border patrol to turn them in. But, all through the movie, her waiter Enrique is organizing an illegal crossing for Anselma, his girlfriend. And, when Anselma is injured in the river during the crossing and Enrique turns to Mercedes, she relents and helps them. A flashback tells us why she's been so hostile up to now and why she's relented: not only was she herself a wetback, but she met Eladio, her future husband, when she made the crossing as a teenage girl. Up to this point, Mercedes has seemed hostile and unforgiving: particularly towards Sam. Now we see her as someone with her own past loss: the only other time we see Eladio is in the scene when he is murdered by Wade. The effect of doing it this way round: a flashback which shows the murder then, much later, a flashback which shows Mercedes and Eladio meeting for the first time as little more than children, is extremely moving. There's still something unresolved about Mercedes' hostility to Sam, as if she blames him for the teenage romance with Pilar which must have threatened her relationship with Buddy. But this insight into her past makes her finally seem much more sympathetic. For the characters in *Lone Star*, too, the Renoir quote would seem to be for the most part appropriate.

Charlie Wade is, however, a problem: how could such a racist murderer be said to have 'reasons'? But again Gilligan's theories provide an insight. Gilligan insists repeatedly that he doesn't seek to excuse but to explain, and if we look at Wade's words and actions as he picks on his victims we can see the underlying fear: of appearing to seem weak. He accuses Eladio of "bragging all over the county how he doesn't have to cut that big gringo sheriff in on it" (smuggling wetbacks) and, after he's shot Eladio in the back, comments that Eladio thought "he could make a fool out of Charlie Wade". With the young Otis, Wade is struck at once by the fact that Otis isn't afraid of him: the big close-up of Wade's eyes, watching Otis suspiciously, immediately captures the hostility of a man who only feels in control when others are fearful and deferential. Wade cannot bear being seen as someone who could be made a fool of, or someone to whom a black man answers back. I would argue that Wade exemplifies a very specific type of violent man: in Gilligan's words: "the most dangerous men on earth are those who are afraid they are wimps" ¹¹.

As in *City of Hope*, Sayles weaves all these threads together: the father-son relationships, the illegal immigration issue, the sense of history, the role of the army, the probing of secrets about the town's past and, above all, the consummation of Sam and Pilar's long-suppressed romance. The discovery of Charlie Wade's skeleton provides a point of departure to open up these issues: as Philip Kemp has pointed out, one model for the film is surely *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962), where the funeral of Tom Doniphon (John Wayne) provides the equivalent point of departure ¹². The connection is made almost explicit when we reach the last flashback, which finally shows 'what happened' on the night Wade was killed. In fact Sayles makes the actual shooting ambiguous: two shots are fired, from pistols filmed at different angles, as if both Hollis and Buddy shot Wade to prevent him shooting Otis in the back. Immediately after the shooting, only Hollis has his gun out, so now it seems as if he fired both shots, but the ambiguity is still

there. Certainly, Wade is killed on behalf of the community, and all three — Buddy, Otis and Hollis — collude in burying the body and concocting a story to cover Wade's 'disappearance'.

Structurally, the killing of Charlie Wade is the film's key 'past traumatic event', and so it is not surprising that here, too, the event echoes in the narrative present. But these echoes do not happen as we might expect — as an expression of the unresolved relationship between Buddy and Sam — but with respect to Otis. We first see both Chet and Otis when the former comes to the latter's club: our first sight of Otis — dispensing drinks and bonhomie to his customers — is through Chet's eyes. This is very like the introduction of the young Otis, seen through Wade's eyes, in the later flashback. In fact, Chet has come out of curiosity: to see the famous grandfather his own father is so "pissed off" about. But we don't yet know this, nor what Chet's attitude to Otis might be. And so, when Chet, looking intently at Otis, reaches into his inside pocket, it really does look as if he is about to take out a gun and shoot him. (This, too, was originally an observation by my students.) What he takes out, in fact, is Otis's flier, advertising his award-winning sauce. But, as Chet looks at this, shots are heard behind him, and he jumps in alarm. An argument has broken out over Athens Johnson, a GI at the base, and her ex-boyfriend Shadow has shot the man she's cur-

rently with, Richie Graves. As Chet heads towards the melee, Otis comes up behind him and ensures he gets out of the club immediately.

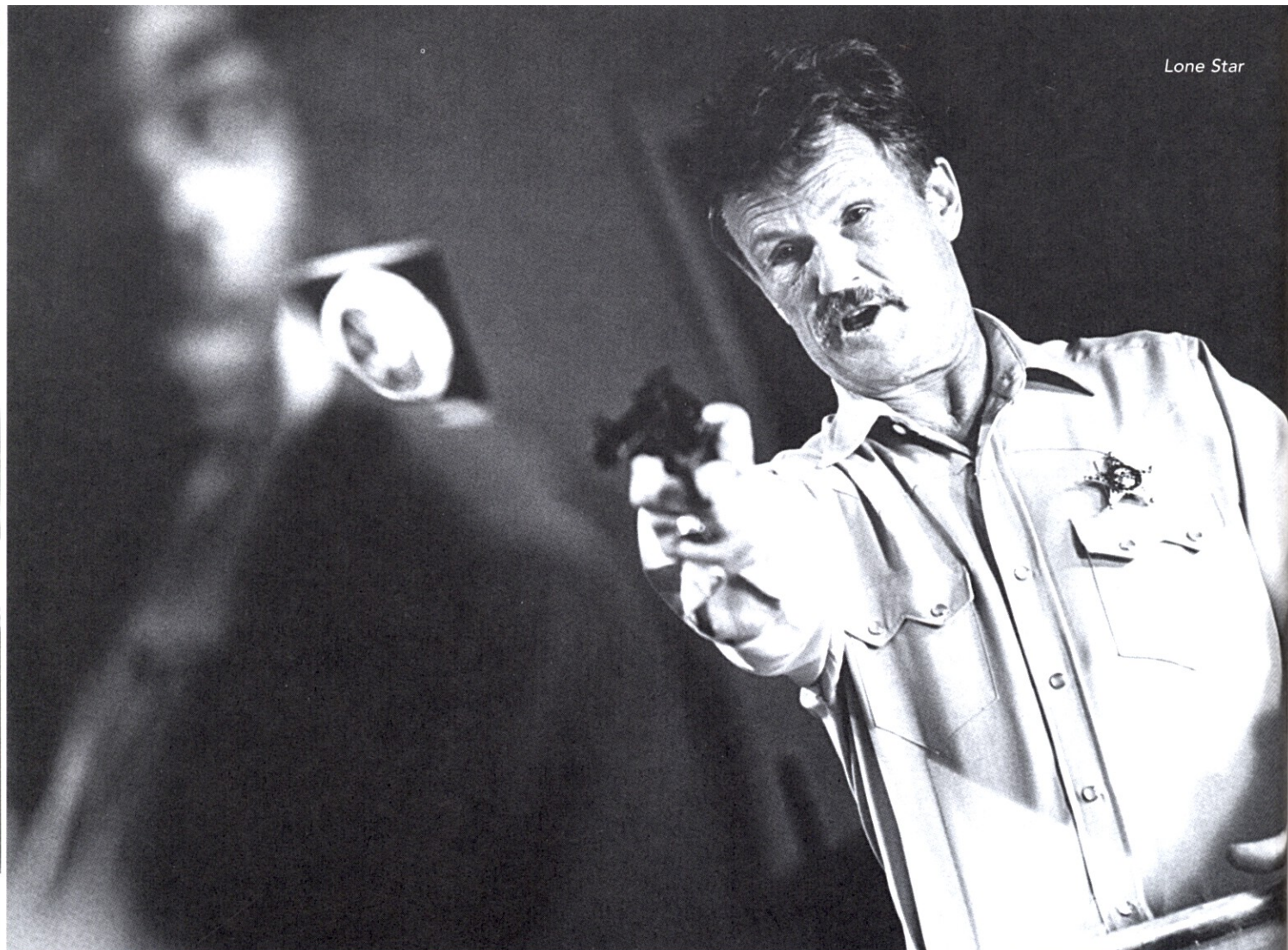
Given the location of the shooting, and the positions of Otis behind the bar and of Chet as he takes out the flier, it really does seem as if the killing of Charlie Wade is echoing here in a displaced form. First, Shadow is linked with Wade: when Athens is interrogated back at the base about the incident, she says "Shadow just come down looking for trouble" just as, in his two encounters with Otis, Wade came to the club looking for trouble. Second, Chet almost certainly feels unconscious hostility towards Otis: later, he lets slip to Otis that Del's toughness as a father is because he, Del, didn't have one. Shadow thus seems like Chet's 'shadow', his repressed, the side of him that is violent. We note that Chet also jumps when caught drawing in Pilar's history lesson, and his reflex response to her question — like a moment of free association — is "Everybody's killing everybody else". Later Del catches him drawing tanks, which also suggests a fascination with the military even as he disavows this. Finally, Otis getting Chet out of the club to protect him from his father's wrath could be seen as

11. Gilligan, p 66.

12. Philip Kemp: review of *Lone Star* in *Sight and Sound* October 1996.

Lone Star





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Lone Star

a displaced version of getting rid of Wade's body.

Here it is Otis who experiences a version of 'the return of the repressed', with his grandson as the unconscious triggering agent. My original argument was that the past traumatic event echoes so long as the conflict it dramatized is unresolved. But here the material has been reinflected. Whilst the truth behind the disappearance of Charlie Wade is an unresolved matter in Otis's life, it is by no means as vital to him as his relationship with his family. The violence unleashed at the moment Chet first looks at his grandfather may also be seen as a metaphorical expression of the years of suppressed family tension finally finding release. But the shooting also serves to set off a chain of events which results, eventually, in the family being brought back together again.

First, the shooting provides Del with an excuse to visit the club: to see what sort of establishment Otis runs and whether he should make it "off limits". For this visit, he makes it clear that he's there purely on official business: he wears his uniform and is very stiff and formal with Otis. As if to emphasize the parallel between the two older generation father-son relationships, Sayles then cuts from the end of this scene to Sam on his way to the unveiling of the memorial plaque to Buddy; during the ceremony, he makes a double-edged speech about Buddy being the

"judge, jury and executioner" when he was a boy.

Second, the shooting prompts Del to toughen up the system of testing the enlisted personnel for drugs: Athens tests positive. This leads Del to interview her, and her frank response to his question about why she's in the army profoundly disturbs him. She says that the army is "one of the best deals they (the whites) offer", but she nevertheless sees both of them, as blacks, as doing the dirty work of the white establishment. The encounter humanizes Del: he goes to see Otis again, but this time to his house and in mufti. Shown round by Otis's wife Carolyn, he then discovers how proud Otis is of him: on the wall are framed news-clippings of his successes. Carolyn comments "Kinda like a shrine, isn't it?" Del is mellowed by the revelation, and this makes him in turn more kindly towards Chet. He reaches the point where he tells Chet that he doesn't have to go into the army, which we sense is a real breakthrough for the boy. And, when Chet then asks if they're ever going to meet Otis, Del says that they'll invite him and Carolyn over.

Del discovering his father's 'shrine' is also linked to an equivalent scene in the Sam-Buddy thread: Sayles cuts to the scene in Otis's house from Sam, in the house he used to live in when married, looking through Buddy's effects. By now, he's learnt that Buddy had a mistress, but not who she was. Buddy's

letters and photographs contain this information, but Sayles cuts before we learn what they reveal: it's not until the film's final scene that we learn the secret of Pilar's paternity. But Sam is also contrasted with Otis: Otis is proud of his family and displays its history on his walls; Sam has nothing on his apartment walls and, explaining this to Pilar, says "I don't have kids", adding "There's nothing that I want to look back on".

The two main father-son stories are linked right down to the line. The discovery of Wade's skeleton takes Sam into his father's past, enabling him both to understand Buddy better but also, finally, to reject him: When, in the final scene, Pilar says "All that other stuff — that history — to hell with it, right?", it's Buddy she's talking about. The shooting in Otis's club initiates a parallel series of events which has, for the participants, a more positive outcome: the promise of the Payne family being reunited. During their respective 'journeys', both middle generation sons come to question their occupations: Sam, we feel, won't run for sheriff again; Del ends with a more skeptical view of the army. Together with the Joe-Nick story in *City of Hope*, this emphasizes the emotional importance to Sayles of fathers and sons: however critical he is of the father-son dynamic, it is a crucial driving force in these films.

Another key series of linked events relates to Sam and Pilar. The regime of each sheriff is associated with a transgression involving someone in a vehicle, and Sayles clearly links the three incidents: Eladio shot by Wade in the front of the truck, Sam and Pilar torn apart by Buddy in the car in the drive-in, and Amado's arrest as he lies on the front seat of the car fixing a stolen radio. Each of the 'victims' is the same sort of age but of a different generation; if we take the drive-in incident to be Sam and Pilar's 'past traumatic event', we can see it is crucially linked to the other two incidents. But for Eladio's murder, there wouldn't have been a problem with Sam and Pilar as a couple; Amado's arrest serves to bring Pilar to the jail and leads her to her re-meeting in the present with Sam. The links between the incidents illustrate once more the density of Sayles's best work; it is fitting that, for their final scene, Sam and Pilar should not just have returned to the drive-in, but be sitting on a car: as if they've symbolically escaped from the place inside the car associated with the 'echoes of violence' down through the generations.

The character who is connected most directly to these three incidents is Mercedes: it's her husband who is shot, her daughter who is involved with a half-brother and her grandson who is arrested. This returns us to the film's crucial discourse around the 'place' of the Mexican immigrants in the USA. What we see through these and other examples — such as Anselma breaking her leg as she crosses the river — is the precariousness of their position. This is developed further in one of the film's most intriguing subplots: the story of the town of Perdido. The first person to mention Perdido is Danny, the one person in Frontera who shares Sam's hostile view of Buddy. According to Danny, when a dam was built on a local river in 1963, Perdido, a shantytown of Mexican immigrants, was wiped off the map: "families were split apart... a whole community was destroyed. And who ends up with lake-front property bought for a fraction of the market price: Buddy Deeds... and Hollis Pogue". And, as Sam pursues his investigation into the killing of Charlie Wade, he also looks into the history of Perdido. Sayles signals the impor-

tance of this by a slow dissolve from Sam's face to a map of the town in a shot which turns through 360 degrees as the camera tracks towards the map: the effect is like a spiraling in; nothing else in the montages which accompany his investigation gets such stress.

Perdido may be seen as the social equivalent of Wade's body: one buried under water; the other under earth — to Sam as he investigates, both seem to be examples of Buddy's unsavoury past. And, although the accuracy of Danny's allegations of corruption is not investigated further, Perdido is symbolically significant. This goes back to what is chronologically the earliest flashback: Mercedes as a teenager calling out as she stands alone in the Rio Grande that she's "Perdido" (lost). The link between the river here and the lake which will later cover Perdido establishes the significance: to go into the USA as an illegal Mexican is to risk becoming lost. We don't see any lakefront properties, but we do see the lake which resulted from the dam: Hollis has a boat on it. And the only photograph we see of Buddy and Mercedes together is also on a boat: it seems more than likely that this, too, was taken on the lake. Mercedes is thus the figure who, symbolically, is saved from the fate of Perdido, of being 'lost': first by Eladio, then by Buddy.

The film's final metaphor concerns the blank (and torn) drive-in screen that Sam and Pilar sit looking at in the last shot. When Pilar arrives at the beginning of the final scene, she asks, jokingly, "When does the picture start?". But, metaphorically, 'the picture' is the rest of their lives. Earlier Pilar told Sam about her feelings after her husband died "There was the rest of my life and I'd no idea what to do with it". He responds by telling her why, when his marriage broke up, he came back to Frontera: "Because you were here". In the next scene they make love, after which she wonders at the absence of pictures on his walls. To his comment about having nothing he wants to look back on, she responds "Like the story's over?", then adds "It isn't; not by a long way". Taken together, these comments signal that it's their story as a couple that will constitute the rest of their lives, but Sam's revelation of Pilar's paternity throws this into jeopardy. However, as they negotiate this crisis and decide that it won't stop them living together, the film hints at a deeper subversive notion. As if the revelation suddenly enables her to understand something, Pilar says "From the first time I saw you in school; all those years we were married to other people; I always felt like we were connected". The suggestion is that they were attracted to each other because they were (half) brother and sister.

The blank drive-in screen thus symbolizes Sam and Pilar starting, in Pilar's words, "from scratch"; filling the screen with the story of their own future together, without the handicap of their personal histories. But the screen also refers to the early movies Sayles scripted for the drive-in trade. And the movies served him well: without the support they provided, Sayles may not have been able to sustain his independence, and to make such movies as *City of Hope* and *Lone Star*. In a film so concerned with the place of history in people's lives, it is fitting that the setting for the final scene should include a self-reflexive reference to the director's own past in the film industry.

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Divergent Dialogues: A Question of Subjectivity

by Diane Sippl

"With gates of silver and bars of gold
Ye have fenced my sheep from their father's fold;
I have heard the dropping of their tears
In heaven these eighteen hundred years."

"O Lord and Master, not ours the guilt,
We build but as our fathers built;
Behold thine images, how they stand,
Sovereign and sole, through all our land."

Then Christ sought out an artisan,
A low-browed, stunted, haggard man,
And a motherless girl, whose fingers thin
Pushed from her faintly want and sin

These set he in the midst of them,
And as they drew back their garment-hem,
For fear of defilement, "Lo, here," said he,
"The images ye have made of me!"

— James Russell Lowell

"In the end, like the Almighty himself we make
everything in our image, for want of a more reliable
model: our artifacts tell more about ourselves than
our confessions."

— Joseph Brodsky, "Watermark"

My decision to preface this discussion with poetry follows several lines of thought, not the least of which regards this article as an artifact, a "watermark" at once transparent and visible. In this tenuous space I would like to refer to a dialogue that has often given me pause to reflect on what I do. This conversation insinuates itself sooner or later into every film festival I attend (whether as consultant, discussant, jury member, catalog essayist, journalist, or curious viewer), and it begins with the quip, "But aren't you being *subjective*...." As I proceed to address key films from three recent festivals, this observation provokes me to consider the viewing context in which such a term circulates with any currency. Of equal interest to me is each artist's pretext for approaching his first feature film as he did. The three works I have chosen to discuss here, remarkably distinct from each other in method, form, and content, serve to answer the question of subjectivity in amazingly similar ways.

In a collegial note to me, filmmaker George Spyros signed off by paraphrasing James Baldwin: "The earth revolves based on the love of a very few people." In Spyros' work, the most enigmatic and intimate of portraits plays itself out as a social dialogue in which the singular subject "speaks out," "acts out," and pulls us into an expanded frame. As Spyros conceived of his film, he was deep in the process of listening — to female vocalists such as Ute Lemper and Maria Callas claiming their own voices, to a mother's artful attention as her speech-impaired son recounted an experience, to the uncanny humor of the mentally ill "on their own steam," to his personal memories of



Last Days of May



coming of age in a Greek American family. His film, evocatively entitled *Last Days of May*, screened at the 1998 American Film Institute's Los Angeles International Film Festival where it brought Dahlia Mindlin a Best Actress award. On first sight it looks like a slice of life peppered with quirky micro-performances — songs, jokes, tongue-twisters, dances. A hand-held camera gives us the feeling of being on the spot, in the moment. At the center of the action is May, an impish 24-year-old on psychiatric medication, and her dynamic rapport with her mother as they face the daily issues of work, health, love, sex, and family.

Soon enough the naturalism of *Last Days of May* reveals itself as a virtual tilt-a-whirl ride in which the real, the imaginary and the symbolic perpetually upstage and displace each other. In a physical world so prosaic we take it for granted (the office, the barroom, the car, the street, the family table), the action continues to rise and swirl without proper exposition or predication. Within the semblance of a narrative, the fictive codes for coherency flip and swerve: motivation, plausibility, and congruency slide and jam up against each other as they do in life — accidentally, partially, fleetingly. The roving camera seemingly plays catch-as-catch-can, recording this “raw” behavior in fragments, when in fact it has all been scripted, storyboarded, and staged. Without our noticing it, the on-going Chautauqua of limericks, puzzles, stunts and anecdotes takes back seat to May's more visceral and peculiar dialogue and body language. Her words spontaneously pun and play; her gestures are more imaginary than colloquial; her actions mime and parody the awkwardness and missteps of others, placing her at once in their shadows and leaps beyond them. The echoes and refrains of an incredibly resonant screenplay delivered with the rhythms and inflections of the individual voice are the film's most fundamental music, and the crescendo comes at a family gathering where May ends up putting on a show. Symbolically, these “last days of May” are a latent blossoming of wisdom and spunk in the midst of bathos and inadequacy.

In a scene that plays like a quiet aside to the central character interactions in the film, May tutors a small boy in a library. Her diminutive body crowned by feathery blond wisps aligns them more as playmates than as teacher and student. He reports what he has read, and May is absorbed. “... and then he gave the doll to her. She was really happy, 'cause it was a pretty doll with yellow hair.” Listening, May removes a pen from her mouth and flicks it as if it were a thermometer, then reads her temperature, and looks at the boy to continue. “And then he took her to the park and she saw a pretty bird,” says the boy. “And he told her he couldn't give it to her 'cause it wasn't his to give.” “You are such a liar,” retorts May. “I am, I guess,” confesses the boy, ashamed. Locking eyes with him, May admonishes him, “I know you haven't read the book. You know you haven't read the book. And the four walls know you haven't read the book. You're a wonderful liar. Go on, will ya, what happens next?” “I don't know, I'm making it up,” he reminds her. “So?” she shrugs. “I thought this was supposed to be true and false,” sighs the boy. “GO ON!” May yells, throwing up her arms.

A simple scene, it shows us the drift of the entire work. For all its apparent verisimilitude, this film really turns on the imaginary axis of memory — that is, it hinges not on what we rec-

Last Days of May

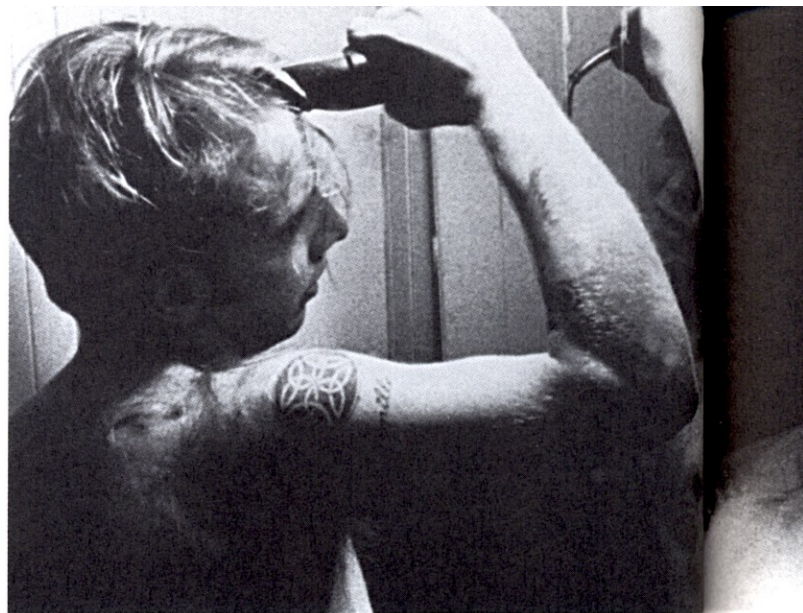
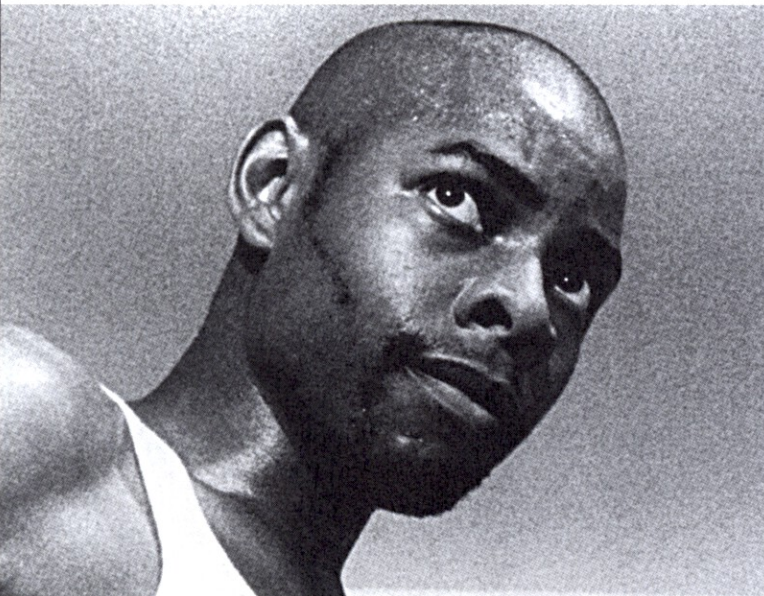




Brother Tied

ognize because we're there, but on how it *feels* when we're not there, when our registers shift. Then how can a memory ever be clear or reliable? "Ambiguity," according to Spyros, "is not a lack of clarity, but rather the presence of palpable absences." In *Last Days of May* we experience a familiar environment without the establishing shot, or a dialogue without point-of-view continuity, or a sequence without a narrative set-up, and find ourselves at a remove from a world we deemed knowable. But we *feel* those absences. At the end of the film, May and her first beau are stretched out on the living room floor and May's mother leaves, passing through a proscenium doorway. The camera moves in on that threshold and lets us peer at her through a white lace curtain that fills our frame as she exits into the world outside. "Knock, knock" are the words beginning a muffled dialogue, a riddle being shared off-screen. In what is more a visual cadenza or a moment of repose than a dramatic resolution, we quietly reflect. Once bent on solving the question of May's particular psychic ailment, we now take stock of the process through which May emerged from a freak to a friend inspiring self-confidence. The riddle remains: was it May or was it us....

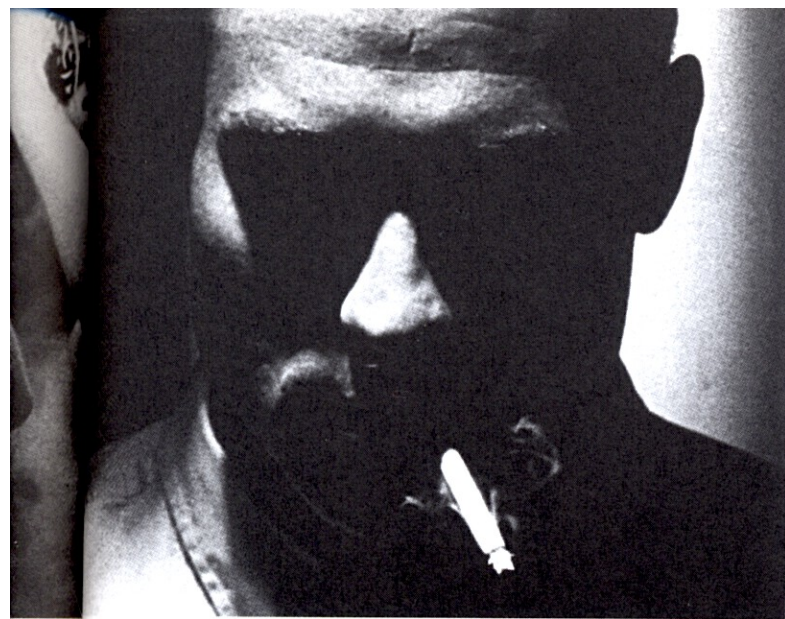
Brother Tied



"To dismiss a position as 'subjective' is to express a yearning for consensus, a longing for agreement, connection," claims Spyros, "but that consensus or 'objectivity' is an imagined one. May wants to be understood. She wants us all to be on the same page, but it's an open book. Subjectivity, with all its historical and cultural factors, is a useful concept. Different subjectivities come up against and bounce off of each other, and it's up to us to make our own dreams of them."

If *Last Days of May* points to a dreamscape we make, *Brother Tied* offers one that we both see and hear. While George Spyros' film, bearing little narrative exposition, rides on the commotion of everyday performance, Derek Cianfrances' project, drawing on multiple levels of subjective character exposition, turns like a three-dimensional kaleidoscope of image, music, and spoken word. Rather than drawing us into the imaginary process, Cianfrance presents us with a symbolic process, one of ambivalent symbols rendered rich in their complexity through associative editing. Whereas Spyros enables us to fathom the peculiar familiarity of his characters, Cianfrance makes strange the basic, normal, taken-for-granted gesture by





Brother Tied

slow motion footage, extreme close-ups, and abstract sound.

The difference of approaches parallels the divergent tasks. *Last Days of May* is a buoyant film charged with zigzags of charisma, but *Brother Tied* is a somber film about voicelessness and vulnerability. It elicits a social consciousness of racial and sexual taboos that are enforced as ploys for power within family systems and social classes. Cal, at a loss for work and money, falls for an actress, Camille, but he can hardly carry on a conversation. His off-screen voice guides us through the internal strife of the inarticulate while at the same time it cues us to discover the challenge of a soulful relationship. Cal befriends Cassius, a barber with his own shop, who models labor as power and self-expression as self-respect. These values begin to be inculcated in Cal, a development that rankles his older brother, Aaron, to the point of jealous rage. Through his bonding with Cassius, Cal comes to claim his voice, but with the timing of tragic irony. The tension in the film is between our identification with the two friends for their loyalty at all costs and our detachment from the social world that would destroy their bond. Equally important is our detachment from the cultural codes that inscribe that world's aesthetics.

To this end *Brother Tied* makes flamboyant use of period music, from 1940s Swing to 1950s and 60s Doo Wop, to twist the holiday standards of the era and at the same time to decontextualize them. *Jingle Bells*, *Silent Night*, and *O Holy Night* become the structuring motifs of sequences ranging from melancholic to tragic as the celebration of promised redemption rings hollow. In a dazzling opening montage, angels and bulbs on a Christmas tree collide and cross as they fade in and out of each other, displaying the refractive possibilities of kitsch when it is recycled for symbolic value. With the same irony, the stunning black and white cinematography of the dramatic shell shifts to color when the disembodied voices of Cal and Cassius narrate their childhood experiences. Cal's home-movie version of memory would logically be black and white, but emotionally it registers in color, as does the fire of Cassius' memory of inadvertently "killing" his own brother. In the bold-relief action that follows these first-person voices, nostalgia is punished by fate

and reverie is but a longing. The only counterpoint to these emotions, and a most effective one, is an unforgettable choreography of staccato shots in a snappy "whistle-while-you-work" montage that would stand any tragedy of racial doom on its head. Its setting is Cassius' newly renovated barbershop, the relied-upon center of proverbial wisdom in a racist society, and the definitive nexus of his life. This virtuoso sequence is at once the most explicit articulation of *Brother Tied's* social ethic and the most entertaining passage of its alternative film language.

Brother Tied bravely insists upon experimentation in addressing some of the most pressing social conflicts of our era; it explores the range of technical possibilities of film — aural, visual, and temporal — but always with regard to the public operations of popular culture. The result is a film that is more idiomatic than personal, and more inspiring than provocative. I say this to suggest that Cianfrance is more particularly lyrical than he is simply poetic. If poetry describes what is consummate, then lyricism proclaims the longing, the feelings that urge the *fait accompli*. Lyrical strategies generate a tone, a mood, not a result but a yearning. Therefore they employ time to turn over the vertical repercussions of a given moment and not to draw out the horizontal groundwork of a narrative. The author elects to elaborate key thematic elements hyperbolically and to foreground the cinematic devices that make this possible as if to celebrate metaphor and paradigm in and of themselves rather than the cinematic illusions they conventionally serve to support. In fact in the case of *Brother Tied*, this formal indulgence stems from an avid rejection of xenophobia and homophobia and their incumbent violence. In cultural terms, *Brother Tied* is mythopoeic, employing the eloquence and the social function of ancient and classical tragedies from the Bible and the Greeks to Shakespeare and Racine but within a contemporary American context of race and class and through the medium of cinema.

Employing European surrealist and expressionist as well as American noir traditions, Cianfrance presents us with a protagonist, Cal, whose emotional turf and introspection determine both the visual and aural fields of the film. Cal's subjective experience motivates the spatial distortions and temporal aberrations



La Ciudad

of what feels increasingly like a dreamscape. However, as structurally dense as this “street tragedy” is, there is nothing obsessively idiosyncratic about the nightmare that unfolds. Christmas brings joy, pain, and also tragic catharsis for Cal, who initiates our expanded perception of the theme in an early passage that the director refers to as a “mindscreen” or premonition of what is to come. What would normally be regarded as the climax of the film’s rising action is shown in a pre-credit sequence, the subsequent drama serving neither as a flashback nor a flashforward. Later in the film, we share in Cal’s pre-conscious vision of the behavior that prompted his decisive action. This second “mindscreen” stages a dream-like displacement of Cal by his nemesis, his brother Aaron. In *Brother Tied* these scenes express more than a subjective character point of view; they enunciate the potential of associative editing and demonstrate its process. Cianfrance, who wrote, directed, shot, and edited *Brother Tied*,

has won numerous awards at festivals, including the 1998 International Film Festival of Mannheim-Heidelberg where I saw the film. He was admired for taking on the constructivist task of identifying and distinguishing the intra-subjective elements of the medium so as to reveal them, paradoxically, as elements of aesthetic objectivity. These keenly delineated filmic devices become our tools for constructing our own relationships to the social contradictions the film pronounces with equal emphasis.

As esoteric as the film might feel, with its stylized cinematography, editing, and sound design, Cianfrance chooses not to circumvent the cultural coding of received film language as much as to expose and divert it, to explore ways of defying its hegemonic practices so as to surprise us and orient us to our own creative capacities. The film’s proverbial settings, period music, and home movie footage bring a populist vernacular to

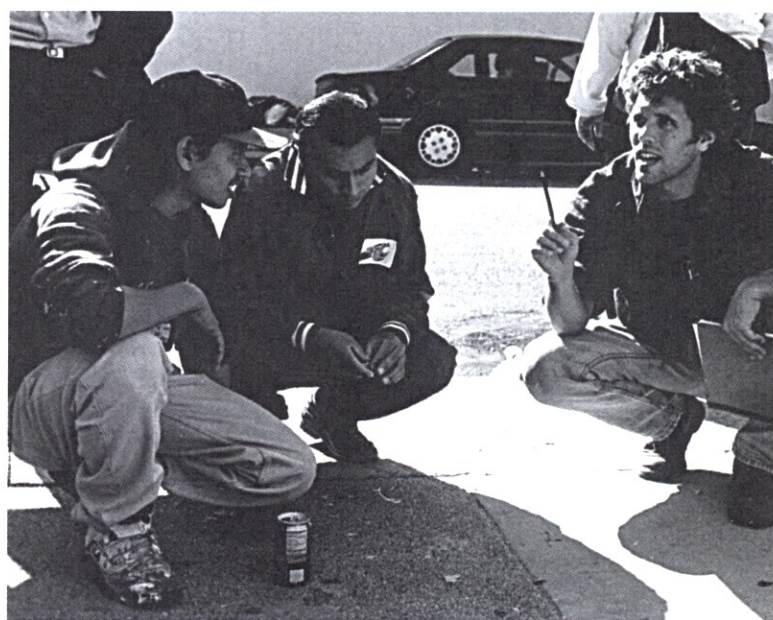
the semblance of epic tragedy that would otherwise seem incongruous.

"With *Brother Tied*," Cianfrance explained to me, "the point was to make a visual story in which the image plays the role of the word. The film explores characters by seeing them as physical beings, skin as skin, a body's movement, a hand on a shoulder... and these are all open to interpretation. I'm not interested in everyone coming out of the theater thinking the same thing." His analogy was to compare Godard's *Contempt* with Haley's comet, because one could peer forever into Godard's work and see layer upon layer. Imagine gazing infinitely at a comet, and the oxymoron of "grasping the entirety" of *Brother Tied* upon a single viewing becomes clear. The film is not made to tell, but to move; not to arrive but to soar. It's not about thinking so much as feeling, and it shows us not what to feel, but how.

According to David Riker, who directed *La Ciudad* (*The City*), it is impossible for our new immigrants to express their own feelings, to each other and to the rest of the world, and for others to relate to them on the level of feeling, when they are referred to as "illegal aliens." The ignorance of this stigma forecloses any level of dialogue. Riker sought to forge and earn this dialogue as a filmmaker by first acknowledging himself as a *gringo*. This meant understanding that when he asked newly arrived Latinos to participate in his film, he was asking them to come out of the shadows of the city — and more, to get in front of the lights. He saw the camera as a tool that has conquered and betrayed, particularly when used in photojournalism, the career that brought Riker to the cinema. "I wanted the people in my photos to be able to speak," he told me when I asked about his approach to making *La Ciudad*.

If *Brother Tied* bears the content elements and poetic diction of classical tragedy, *La Ciudad* begs a comparison; its tone and effect are similar, particularly in its use of strikingly lit black and white cinematography and non-diegetic narrators. In *La Ciudad* we are caught in the crossflow of an elegy for receding dreams and a fervent prayer for connection. The film is a messianic experience of multiple subjectivities that, taken together, promise understanding and faith. Its plaintive score flows in waves of lament and longing as the camera contemplates the city's bridges, towers, and transit vehicles. However, the dream-scape of *La Ciudad* resides within its actors rather than within the intrasubjective distancing devices of an experimental cinema. Riker breaks down the epic narrative structure into multiple vignettes that gain power in repetition and variation rather than in the intensification of a single conflict. If in *Last Days of May*, Spyros commenced his research by tuning his ear to "overlooked" dialogues, Ryker carried this a few steps further by learning Spanish in the midst of, and for the purpose of, listening to and interviewing his subjects-turned-performers. If *Last Days of May* draws on the nature of performance, *La Ciudad* dwells on the performers themselves and their act of performing. If *Last Days of May* suggests that connection and consensus are to be bridged on the imaginary level, *La Ciudad* posits that multiple subjectivities must be enacted, and not only in terms of the imaginary and the symbolic, but especially in terms of the real. If Spyros and Cianfrance show us modes of memory and perception, Ryker adds to these modes of being and seeing. His

David Riker directing a scene from *La Ciudad*



La Ciudad



La Ciudad



La Ciudad

film shows how survival becomes a matter of active presence.

La Ciudad, which was honored as the closing night presentation of the 1998 Los Angeles International Latino Film Festival, was written, directed and edited by David Ryker in collaboration with his cast, Latino immigrants from many countries who struggle to survive in New York City today. The film is a series of four sobering tales in which these non-professional actors play themselves, having created their roles with Ryker based on their own memories and dreams. Therefore, *La Ciudad* raises questions regarding methods of production and the organization of social and technical resources in making a film.

The local photography studio, used as a leitmotif to lace the film together, is an organic part of immigrant life for two reasons: every immigrant has to produce identification for living in the U.S., and everyone wants to send a photo home, to say, "I'm alive. I'm here. I'm okay." While the studio becomes a visual threshold for rites of passage — not only immigration but first communions, "sweet-fifteen" parties, and weddings are recorded — it is also an exchange where new identities are created. People shave or get a new haircut or wear special clothes or choose different names to frame themselves as newly evolved persons. Ryker highlights this process in the film by returning to it as a refrain that structures the "ballad" of immigrant life, but it's important to realize that it was also a *modus operandi* for him in generating the remaining content of his film as well. He used a

medium-format camera with black and white, Polaroid film that allowed him to take spontaneous portraits and present them to the subjects so that the meaning of their relationship might change: a conversation might be possible with a stranger if he used his camera as a tool to build trust. Taking many photo-portraits this way, with soft, indirect light before a white screen, he was eventually able to cast his film. The genuineness of that serious, earnest moment (as opposed to the frivolity or even cynicism of slick consumer snapshots) was the essence of his film for him: candidly *looking* at these faces against the social policy that millions of workers in the United States remain invisible. "They cross a border and, undocumented, work in the back of a house or office or kitchen or remote construction site," he reminded me. "We're not meant to *look* at them, because if we do, there will be an immediate connection." In fact *La Ciudad* is culminated with a montage of successive faces, each confronting the camera, so that the spectator cannot ignore or forget them, the totality with such a variety of skin colors, facial characteristics, ages, genders, and cultures that there would inevitably be someone with whom to identify.

Ryker, alluded to in *La Ciudad* by the neighborhood portrait photographer, deflects authority from himself as a filmmaker by transferring the power of the gaze to the subjects of the photographs. In telling their own stories, the filmic/social actors of *La Ciudad* give voice to others, and the exchange that is generated becomes an *entr  e* to subjective "inter-acting" with the spectators. The self-recording of immigrant life is a means of negotiating it, articulating it, and understanding it, first among immigrants themselves and then among long-standing Americans as well. Photography and cinema, then, are not simply opportunities for personal documentation — not just the means for documenting a subjectivity — but modes for practicing a relationship, between the subject as author and the filmmaker as mediator, on one side, and the spectator as author, the author of a new intersubjective relationship, on the other side. The intimacy of these first-person voices, metonymical as they are, allows for a true intimacy of the medium, a new intercourse of shared social space. Ryker re-orient us as producers and consumers: when the subjects of *La Ciudad* commission and make use of their own photographic images and invite us to witness them in doing so, they are composing cinematic self-portraits as well, portraits that address us directly and beg our *re-cognition*. Any of these individual expressions invites us to return its gaze as an already self-authored and motivated gaze, an active one that engages us in an active exchange.

Ryker rejects a film language of color cinematography with continual camera movement and rapid editing because although it is commonly regarded as the language of cinematic realism today, he feels it has lost its truthfulness. Ironically for him, black and white cinematography, a static camera, a slow editing pace, and a classical composition of images in terms of framing, balance, and the choreography of actors in front of the camera all seem to suggest to audiences today a self-conscious or pretentious style of filmmaking rather than a mode of realism. "The irony is that, add to these strategies the choice to use location settings, non-professional actors, and a classical score, and viewers respond as if they were watching a documentary," he explains. "Almost everyone is convinced that this *La Ciudad* is a

docudrama or a hybrid film. It is entirely scripted and staged, rehearsed and acted, but because the energy and the integrity is genuine, people refuse to watch it as a fiction film." In fact there is no aspect of the screenplay that was not presented to the community for critique and change; however, the film is comprised of scripted vignettes and narration as well. The speakers are either present or not present within the dramas, but each spare and isolated voice carries its own lyrical tone, whether it be in a lover's letter, a mother's prayer, or a father's improvisational reading of a storybook to his daughter when he is actually illiterate.

The vignette that strikes me as the most original, both in its situation and in its dramatic and filmic execution, is one called "Home." Seeking the apartment of his uncle, a young man newly arrived from Mexico is lost, stumbles upon a "sweet-fifteen" party, and is lured inside. In a timeless moment he and one of the guests fall in love. He is then all the more enchanted with the city, but she cannot hide her disillusionment. In a miracle that only lovers could believe, they discover they are from the same village. In his elation he leaves her home the next morning to surprise her with a breakfast spread when she awakens. But then a cruel reality sets in, through what would otherwise be a purely cinematic means of space and time. The scale of the city overwhelms him. Suddenly, in the endless concrete canyons of look-alike housing projects, he is dwarfed and alone, separated now from the love of his life. Disoriented, incommunicado, and invisible, longing to belong, he is suspended once again in the anonymous to and fro movement of the city.

We, along with the young man in *La Ciudad*, feel the "presence of palpable absences," that ambiguity that appears to sever us from an objective reality or knowable truth all the while we project our own memories and dreams upon the screens we create. Singular as they may be in a given moment, these multiple subjectivities are watermarks that tell more about us than we can know. Critics and festivals can make visible our divergent dialogues, be they of the unstable, the inarticulate, or the disenfranchised among us. We can, in coming together to be more curious about each other and more open to artistic processes, learn how we make meaning, and how we might make it differently. Then the question, "Aren't you being subjective?" can be answered, "Yes, hopefully, because it is this very subjectivity that allows us to perceive the cinema at the outset and enables us to recognize and value singular voices in the social dialogue."

I would like to thank the filmmakers, George Spyros, Derek Cianfrance, and David Riker, for sharing in our own dialogues for my preparation of this article, as well as the festivals that have helped bring their films to light.

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Third Cinema in the "First" World: *Eve's Bayou* and *Daughters of the Dust*

by April Biccum

Contemporary discussions of the world's division of wealth centre around categories of North and South. While many theorists attempt to problematize the tendency to homogenize these categories, it is more often the South and not the North which gets discussed in terms of economic and political stratification. Very few critics are willing to engage in discussions of the ways in which the North "underdevelops" itself simultaneous with its exploitation of the labour and resources of the Third World, and that this self-underdevelopment also configures around race, gender and class. Large cultural apparatuses, like Hollywood film, create a monologue which is difficult to interrupt given the stringent politics of distribution in North America and Western Europe. So that North Americans are taught to view their culture as homogeneous, and less economically stratified in comparison with "periphery" countries. We're taught to perform a kind of double think when confronted with the evidence or residue of the violence which enabled, and continues to enable, Western affluence. The homeless First Nations people that I encounter every day on Bloor Street are an excellent example, and their presence works against the cultural amnesia that large cultural apparatuses work so hard to create.

In his discussion of Third World cinema in "Toward a Critical Theory of Third World Films", Teshome H. Gabriel discusses the features of Third cinema versus Western or Hollywood cinema without a discussion of how films with these features can be produced in the industrialized world by communities who are marginalized by Hollywood's master narrative. Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* is an excellent example of North American independent film which works within a similar structural and political economy of distribution (marginalization) and misreading as does Third Cinema. A comparison between Julie Dash's independent film, and Kasi Lemmons larger budget, wider release *Eve's Bayou* will demonstrate the differences between the Hollywood model and the Third Cinema model and the ways in which each film remembers the history of slavery, employs cinematic space, constitutes objectivity, subjectivity and desire; it will also demonstrate the differences around the struggle for cultural memory for each film and what that means for capitalist consumer culture.



Both films configure community around cultural memory but there are huge differences in presentation, characterization and ideological structure that situates *Eve's Bayou* within the economy of Teshome Gabriel's first phase and situates *Daughters of the Dust* somewhere in Gabriel's second to third phase of Third cinema. *Eve's Bayou* is linear in narrative, suspense driven, hero centred, and while the narration and the plot weave in the category of memory, slave ancestry lurks as an aside and never interrupts the film's desire to briefly problematize, and then reassert a romantic notion of patriarchy in spite of its misleading presentation as a "chick flick". *Daughters of the Dust* goes miles farther in reclaiming cinematic space for Black women with a grammar that distributes space, never focuses it, and with a narrative that continually recalls the history of slavery as the contradiction and interruption to modernity, so that modernity and cultural memory are continually in a space of tension, not conflict to be resolved within the narrative.

Both narratives are situated in the Southern United States in spaces which bear the trace of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.



The bayou of *Eve's Bayou* is named for a slave who in return for her healing magic, was given land for herself and her descendants. Ibo Landing in *Daughters of the Dust* is named for the Ibo tribe which arrived on the last slave ship and, so the legend goes, refused to live in slavery. The difference between the two films is that slavery comprises the background in *Eve's*, and continually resurfaces in *Daughters*, including being marked on the bodies of its characters via indigo stained hands. The narrative of *Eve's* carries on in spite of the backdrop of slave history, and centres around the psychological struggle of the family with patriarchy. The fairness of Eve's complexion and the backdrop of Creole culture and language could've been an opportunity for the filmmaker to use the shared history of slavery and cultural memory to complicate popular notions of the Nation's history and the implications it bears for capitalism (ie. that North American economic ascension could never have happened without slavery) in a way that a film like *Amistad* never could. The creole setting of *Eve's* could have been used by Kasi Lemmons to complicate notions of an essential blackness, and subsequently essential whiteness, which are critical to considerations of the

North American black diaspora, and are critical to breaking down the implicit posited "whiteness" of North American national identities. These fleeting features might even be removed from *Eve's* without affecting the coherence of the narrative, which is highly episodic and Romanesque in the classical sense and, typical of Hollywood dramas, follows the adventures of one character and resolves her psychological journey in forgiveness, rebirth and renewal. The opening and closing narrative voice-over of Eve bears the only reference to memory, and the memory is not a shared cultural memory, but the memory of an individual, Eve. The narrative encourages the response that its conflicts are solely psychological not systemic, and can be resolved by a gun, marriage, love and individual commitment to community.

Like others before me, I have the gift of sight, but the truth changes colour depending on the light and tomorrow can be clearer than yesterday, as the selection of memories some are elusive, some are printed indelibly on the brain. Each image is like a thread, each thread woven together to make a tapestry of intricate texture, and the tapestry tells a story and the story is our past.

The memory referred to is received, not collective, and not contested and struggled for. It bears no marking of the struggle to remember, the struggle for that memory to be heard, and the struggle to define a community which is ever elusive in the clash and violence of North American nation building. Whatever fleeting reference to memory and a notion of shared history, the structure of the narrative would remain intact if this voice-over were removed, and in fact it reflects very little about the narrative of *Eve's Bayou* as a whole. In the reference to "the gift of sight" *Eve's* is recalling and employing African magic, mythical and religious practices, but *Daughters* harkens these practices back to their African source, and then reminds her audience that a number of different religious practices were transferred and transformed via slavery, and many new religious practices were adopted. *Eve's*, by contrast, romanticizes voodoo magic as the liberating force within the narrative. Voodoo liberates the original Eve from the bondage of slavery, it liberates Eve and her family from the bondage of irresponsible patriarchy and it liberates Aunt Mozelle from the burden of guilt. Even Aunt Mozelle's hybrid of Voodoo and Christianity does nothing to recall the clashing and subordination of religious practices; in fact it works in conjunction with her existential Christian wondering whether "there is a divine point to it all" to reaffirm Western liberal humanism as the films ideological position. Voodoo magic operates in *Eve's* as that essential Africanness which will somehow propel its characters out of their slave past and toward the "good life", in spite of the circumstances of slavery, systemic racism and its contradictory implications for Liberal capitalist consumer culture. *Daughters* by contrast uses traditional religious practices as a site of conflict around notions of modernity and passage to the North, and as a continual reminder of shared cultural memory. The family divide around retaining the "old ways", versus cultural assimilation in the movement north, works against any notion of an essential Africanness or received community, and designates cultural



Eve's Bayou

memory as something to be struggled for. This fissure also works to posit community as something exacerbated by the violence of slavery, something which is unresolvable and ever in flux. The history of slavery informs the very structure of the narrative, and operates functionally within plot devices such as the flight North (away from lynchings), and the voice-over narration of the unborn child, (the result of rape likely by a white man), which move the narrative along.

There is a marked similarity in the look of both films, but there are striking differences in the cinematic uses of space, and narrative grammar. *Daughters* uses wide-angle deep focus shots, and employs a dual narration and multiple points of view, whereas there is nothing particularly significant about the camera work and narrative logic of *Eve's*. It uses eye-level position, close-ups and movement only to portray character development in a linear sequence of events, with each directly bearing on the next, and each frame dominated by a single character. A good example of this kind of cinematography in *Eve's* is the scene in which Roz and Mozelle encounter the voodoo practitioner in

the market. The shot is set up with Roz in the foreground in sharp focus with her face marked with a look of indecision, and Mozelle standing haughtily off in the background out of focus and visibly showing displeasure. The clash between Mozelle and the voodoo practitioner could have been used as a site to explore the divisions and stratifications of black religious practices, but instead the camera work uses traditional devices which constitute the characters in emotional and psychological portraiture, instead of exploiting space as a subtext which creates a layered and subtle narrative. *Daughters* by contrast actively employs cross-cutting from one scene to another, with no logical sequencing which creates a sense of simultaneity rather than linearity, and of community (however stratified) rather than individuality. The use of cross cutting and non-linear story telling engages the audience and challenges the viewer who might at first not understand what's happening in the narrative. *Daughters* is by no means an easy film to watch, which is telling in comparison with *Eve's* spoon feeding traditional narrative style. A good example of this kind of editing is the scene between Eula, Trula and Yellow Mary in the tree which cross cuts to a conversation between Iona and Myown and their cousins in which Yellow Mary and her companion are discussed, which cross cuts again to the men making plans in the sand, and then cuts back again to the original scene, so that cinematic space is employed more democratically. Even the position of the characters within the frame supplies the subtext with who is included in and who is excluded from community.

The actors used in *Eve's* situate it directly in the realm of Hollywood, in spite of its art house rhetoric and distribution, whereas *Daughters* is cast with performers associated with the American Black Cinema movement. This creates a different iconography for each film. One in which the actors are known, polished, shown in professional lighting, and in which their performances are judged against other performances in their more mainstream films. *Eve's* becomes a vehicle for the actors Lynn Whitfield and Samuel L. Jackson to show off their more dramatic talents, and it lends them credence for the diversity of the roles they take on, as well as stigmatizing *Eve's* as a lower budget risk taken on by highly paid actors in the name of "Art" and a commitment to "blackness". It also ensures wider distribution within major venues.

In *Daughters of the Dust: the Making of an African American Women's Film*, Julie Dash talks about the experience of working with actors in natural lighting due to budget constraints, who operate within the same community and have worked together on other independent projects. Many of the actors stayed on after the money ran out to assist out of a belief in the integrity of the project. This is one of the major distinctions Teshome Gabriel makes between the Hollywood model and the second to third phases of Third Cinema, and it bears directly on the politics of distribution which Dash describes as the project of white men deciding what is to be seen under the guise of marketability. I'm addressing here the relationship between knowledge and power in discourse and the importance of the politics of representation in popular discourse (whose stories are being told and how); it is imperative to recognize the significance of interrupting and interrogating the narrative (and it really is only one) told by Hollywood, particularly given its monolithic capacity as the

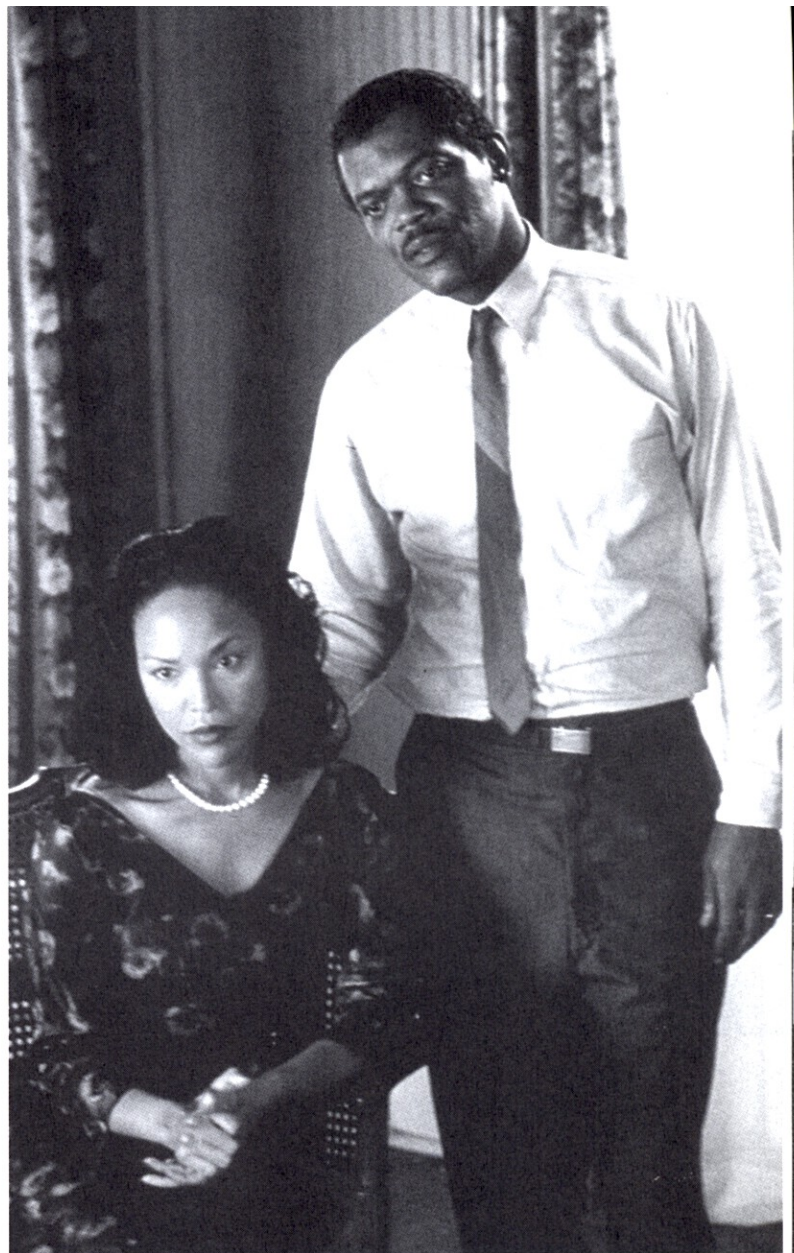
source and propagator of popular culture. The fact that Dash's film is not easily marketable, that it is relegated to the sphere of "cult classic", speaks volumes for its capacity to interrupt the Liberal master narrative. An unfortunate catch 22 of consumer culture is that cultural production has to be seen in order to effectively perform subversion.

One of the factors that distinguishes second phase film from third phase for Teshome Gabriel is the uncritical acceptance or undue romanticism of the ways of the past without condemning its faults. Gabriel identifies a

....nostalgia for the vastness of nature {which} projects itself into the film form, resulting in long takes and long or wide shots..... and the landscape depicted ceases to be mere land or soil and acquires a phenomenal quality which integrates humans with the general drama of existence (Gabriel, p.32)

The opening sequence of *Daughters* shows Nana with the soil of Ibo Landing drifting through her fingers, and bell hooks in the *Making* talks about Julie Dash's different use of land and agriculture which is toiled for survival and not in slavery, so that the residents of Ibo Landing have a different relationship to the land they live on than the American viewing audience is used to seeing with respect to the history of slavery in the U.S.. Another feature of the second phase is the positing of culture and history as a source of strength in conjunction with a dichotomy between rural and urban life, and the traditional dichotomized with modern value systems. This feature is evident in *Daughters*, and Julie Dash in the *Making* claims that her project was about the "tradition, family and life {that} would always sustain us" (Dash et al, p.6). Dash's project is about recuperating a cultural memory in the face of a monologue which promotes amnesia. It could be argued that the "old ways" are romanticized in *Daughters* but for the presence of Balil Muhammed, a Muslim, whose presence recalls African cultural diversity and conflict, particularly considering the active role Islam played in the slave trade (Conneau, pp. 63-172), and that both Christianity and Islam are culpable for the enslavement of West African people. Balil's presence in the narrative explodes any utopian notion of African unity and essence. It speaks to conquest (both Christian and Muslim), it speaks to diversity and it speaks to struggle. Furthermore, Balil's presence disturbs the possibility of a fixed and received community in *Daughters* because when asked by Mr. Snead, Viola degrades Balil as a heathen and only begrudgingly admits that he's part of the family by virtue of his presence on the island. A further testament to the complication of community as a category occurs when Nana is holding the relic for everyone to kiss and Mr. Snead presumes to include himself in the community to no objection, but Trula, Yellow Mary's companion, is always set apart from the circle, and that scene shows her walking away. So even the "old ways" have their mechanisms of exclusion, and therefore, in some ways, *Daughters* approaches the levels of integration of Gabriel's third phase.

In *Eve's* no such community lines are drawn, with the exception of the voodoo lady, because the space of *Eve's Bayou* is not a social space where the tensions of community are portrayed, it's an individual space where community is a given. Even though the voodoo lady is excluded from the central communi-



Eve's Bayou

ty of the film, she serves a narrative purpose that bears on Eve's psychological transformation. The voodoo lady exists to teach Eve her lesson, which is not to mess with unChristianized voodoo practices and to embrace her rightful place in the received community. The voodoo lady also serves as a foreshadowing narrative device and motivator in her "reading" of Roz's future, and while she does this from somewhere outside the received community, her presence in no way calls it into question. *Eve's* also makes none of the distinctions of Gabriel's second phase, and while its presentation is romantic, its romanticism configures around a distinctly heterosexist notion of family as community in spite of, and in the face of, difference. So that "your Daddy loves you" becomes the cure all for everything that ails, the glue that hinges the community in a kind of "love will conquer all" Liberal mantra. And it's a mantra that hails from beyond the grave as Mozelle gives Eve her father's final message which enables Eve to forgive Cicilly's lie, and re-centres the community, resolving the narrative conflict under the umbrella of forgiveness and renewal in the absence of the patri-



Eve's Bayou

arch, but does so nevertheless with the affirmation of the patriarch. Needless to say these features situate *Eve's* rather firmly in the Liberal patriarchal tradition of master narrative, and leads me into a discussion of subjectivity, objectivity and desire.

Traditionally in the discourse of psychoanalysis women are the commodities of desire, and the prohibition/inaccessibility of the first/lost object of desire, the mother's body, is internalized, representing at once the mark of difference/lack, and the threat of castration. Women lack the means of access to the first object of desire represented by the paternal phallus (de Lauretis, p.216). In spite of the misleading feminist "art house" rhetoric which surrounded *Eve's* upon its release which attempted to differentiate it somewhat from the Hollywood model, the entire film can be read in terms of a desire for the phallus and a reassertion of patriarchy. Women in *Eve's* are at once both the desiring subjects and the subjugated objects, requiring patriarchal love for wholeness and authenticity. Eve's psychological journey is one in search of affirmation from a neglectful father. This is established at once with the rivalry between Cicilly and Eve for their father's affection, and exacerbated by their father's persistent absence in pursuit of extra marital pleasures. In fact, every female character is positioned vis a vis her desire for a man, including, for example, Roz's desire for the affirmation of her neglectful husband, and Mozelle's desire for a husband that won't die on her. And it's not an empowering female subjectiv-

ity, since in the end it reasserts and reconfigures the patriarchal position as necessary to a sense of community. And the objectification of the patriarch is not total, since the object needs to be marked by difference and absence, the whole point of desire is the inaccessibility of the object. One glaring example of this desire for a protector of the community is the scene in which Mozelle describes the death of her second husband. A lover of hers turns up to "steal" her away from her husband one day, and Mozelle only realizes how much she loves her husband when he 'stands up' for her, bravely faces the gun and is shot. The 'object' of desire for the women in *Eve's* is the traditional patriarch who will shelter and protect, and without whom happiness is incomplete. When Roz is describing her feelings for Louis she claims, "here is a man who knows how to fix things. He's a healer, he'll take care of me". And indeed, in spite of his infidelities Louis is summoned when Cicilly has her "break down", and Roz and Louis put their differences aside and present a united front in the face of whatever threatens Cicilly, which harkens again to the "love will conquer all" Liberal mantra. Interestingly enough, what threatens Cicilly is filial rejection. Cicilly describes to Eve a scene of sexual transgression in which Louis is the perpetrator, but later on after his death Louis is absolved via a letter to Mozelle which describes Cicilly as the perpetrator of the sexual transgression. So that in spite of the conflict of the episode, the real culprit is Cicilly's desire, and the ghost of the patriarch re-

ascends and is forgiven. With this narrative turn, *Eve's*, instead of conflating and complicating traditional subject/object relations, actually reaffirms them by demonizing Cicilly's desire. Women in *Eve's* never occupy the locus of autonomous desiring subject without predicament. Furthermore, the film provides a surrogate in the form of Julian, Mozelle's new lover and soon to be husband, who enters the film when Louis exits to take over as patriarchal caregiver. Two scenes show Julian carrying Cicilly away to comfort and console her, and the conflict of the plot — the absence of the sought after phallus — is set aright via the reparation of the family through marriage. *Eve's Bayou* exists in the narrow confines of heterosexist, Liberal patriarchal discourse while it parades as an "art house", feminist "chick flick".

Daughters of the Dust by striking contrast not only allows for a queer reading of the relationship between Trula and Yellow Mary, but it doesn't couch the ambiguity in utopian "love will conquer all" rhetoric. Trula exists in the film as a hinge of ambiguity and ambivalence around how relationships are constituted, and who is included in community. All of the psychoanalytic categories I've just used on *Eve's Bayou* break down when I attempt to apply them to *Daughters* because, typical of Third film, *Daughters's* prime "rhetorical strategy" relies on social and political conflicts rather than the paradigm of "oedipal conflict and resolution" (Gabriel, p.39). So that perhaps community as a category could be posited as the lost/absent object of desire, but Trula and Balil both exist to some degree outside of community, and neither seem to seek it. No one sends Trula away from the circle, she walks away, but by the same token no one invites her to be a part of it either. Traditional roles of patriarchy and matriarchy are not only disturbed, but are never allowed to form as a result of the democratic allocation of space between male and female characters, so that there is no possibility of reading the phallus into or out of the text. There is no place in which traditional subject/object relations can be posited either, without breaking down. *Daughters* de-centres the usual white/male subject position by using Black women in a space where Black women are traditionally invisible, or marginalized in roles as prostitutes, mammy or slut (Dash et al., p.40). Patriarchy is never allowed to congeal because *Daughters* exhibits "a sense of masculinity that is not disrupted by the actions of the oppressor" (Ibid.). Even the scenes in which Mr. Snead is "documenting" the family's crossing over, break down subject/object relations when one considers the ambivalence of his subject position as a light skinned black man with an ethnographic approach to these "salt water Negroes". As Kobena Mercer points out in *Welcome to the Jungle* (in the chapter in which he reads the photographs of Robert Maplethorpe), the seeing/being seen hierarchy is not so rigidly coded when both subject and object share politically marginalized spaces of enunciation (Mercer, p.194). And, as bell hooks and Julie Dash discuss in the *Making*, the positions of Viola as anthropologist and Mr. Snead as ethnographer work to make *Daughters* a critical commentary on ethnographic film (Dash et al., p.38), because both characters are marginalized objects as surely as they seek to be colonizing subjects and so conflate and complicate both categories. Furthermore, as bell hooks comments, Viola's Christianity "becomes a hidden force of colonialism", and it's a violence that desires the stripping away of the cultural memory that Nana's

ancestor worship desires to retain (Ibid., p.37); and it speaks to the complexity of the colonial project, which is successful in part because of its ability to place certain of the colonized in the position of colonizer thereby exacerbating the lines of alliance, and creating enmity in oppression. These hybrid positions in *Daughters* work against any utopian notion of received community, while at the same time complicating traditional subject/object relations.

The differences between *Eve's* and *Daughters* in terms of subjectivity and objectivity extend to the consideration of audience reception and reading. *Eve's* is packaged as a commodity, sold as such and consumed as such. As Teshome Gabriel points out, what generally happens when Third cinema is viewed by a Western audience is that it is received as if it were a documentary. Julie Dash had this experience and *Daughters* was critiqued for a lack of authenticity. It was said that the women were too beautiful, their cloths too nice and that Gullah life and culture was not adequately represented. But, Julie Dash's aim was to move away from "reality, accuracy and authenticity into a realm of the imaginative" (Dash et al., p.31), and she effectively complicates and conflates the categories of 'Myth' and 'History' by centering her narrative at once in the factual, the great Northern migration, and in the mythical, Ibo Landing. In her research Dash discovered that there were several inlets dubbed as the original landing site of the Ibo people, so by setting her fictional story in "Ibo Landing", and allowing multiple readings of the legend to be voiced by several characters (i.e. literal and figurative), Dash recalls the importance of myth to the struggle for identity. The space/no space that Ibo represents evacuates any claim to authenticity, and relocates it in the position of the original/lost object of desire. So that questions around identity and authenticity as they are (de)centred and struggled over within cultural memory, are the very questions which *Daughters* seeks to raise, not resolve. Dialogues around authenticity are always/already grounded in the discourse of cultural imperialism which in general seeks to erase the contradictions of capitalist modernity, that the sale of bodies produced it, and that the plunder of resources (both human and otherwise) sustains it. So that, via cultural production like *Daughters of the Dust*, the grand Liberal lie that posits a homogeneous Northern wealth and affluence can be interrupted and interrogated.

April Biccum is a recent graduate from the Arts English program at York University. She is poised to pursue her Masters degree in Critical Theory at the University of Nottingham, UK.

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**TORONTO INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL**

Julian Henriques' *Babymother*

by Marcy Goldberg

Julian Henriques could have made an earnest social documentary about the plight of Afro-Caribbean teenage mothers on London housing estates. Or he could have made a fluff escapist musical about dancehall culture in Britain. But what he did instead was much more interesting: moving beyond the two poles of socially-conscious doc and feel-good fiction to make *Babymother*, an all-singing, all-dancing "ragga to riches" tale which also takes a sensitive look at life in the little-known London suburb of Harlesden (NW10), which Henriques calls the "true reggae centre" of the UK.

The story itself is a mix of classic plot elements and the distinctive culture of Harlesden. Anita, the "babymother" of the title, dreams of being a dancehall DJ. But as a single mother of two on a run-down housing estate, she has plenty of other things to worry about. Byron, the father of Anita's children, is an up-and-coming reggae star who woos her with his romantic lyrics but is dead set against the idea of a

career of her own: she should be home taking care of the kids. And as far as he's concerned, one (male) musician in the family is enough. Anita's main source of support is her mother Edith, but when Edith suddenly dies, Anita is forced to cope on her own. And she must also come to terms with a truth she has long suspected: Edith is actually her grandmother and her 'older sister' Rose is her real mother. A baby-mother herself, Rose had not been able to pursue a career and take care of her child at the same time.

Anita is determined not to be forced to make that kind of choice. She has no money to cut a studio demo. But she has talent, ambition, loads of cheek, and two best girlfriends as determined to make it as she is. Together, as "Neeta, Sweeta and Nastie," the three pin their hopes on an upcoming singing contest. Will this be their chance for a breakthrough? And can Anita win success without losing Byron? Can there be any doubt? After all, this is a musical...

Babymother is writer/director Henriques' first feature, but he came to the project with extensive experience making music and arts documentaries. In addition, with a Jamaican family background, and having lived in Harlesden for 15 years, he was steeped in the culture which gives rise to the film's subject. Hearing women talk about their dancehall experiences was an early inspiration for the *Babymother* story. Henriques was captivated by the empowering image of women dressing up and going out dancing together: "I was fascinated by these women who are determined to have a good time and remain in control of their lives."

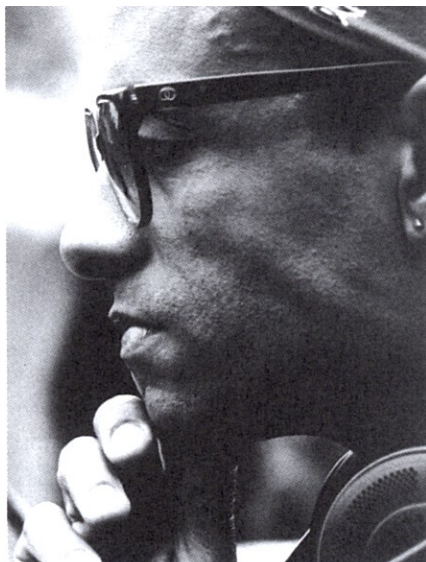
With its glittering costumes, vibrant soundtrack, and dialogues in the form of reggae toasts, *Babymother* might be suspected of romanticizing the lives of people that in reality aren't all that glamorous. But in fact, the film makes it clear that music and style can be effective strategies of resistance. The extravagant outfits worn by Neeta, Sweeta and Nastie are inseparable from their rebellious, ambitious personalities. As Wil Johnson, the actor who plays Byron, puts it in a quotation in the press kit: "The flamboyance and competitiveness, even in what people wear, is a way for people to overcome lives that can be pretty harsh. It's uplifting for them, like saying we might not have much but tonight we are special."

Marcy Goldberg: Your film is clearly about social realities but it's not a "social issue" film...

Julian Henriques: What I set out to do was to give a flavour of a set of people's lives, which on the surface may not be very familiar to a big audience. I didn't start from the social issues. You can't. You can make documentaries about social issues. When you're developing a script, you learn that because something happened to you is not ever a sufficient reason to put it in a script. You don't take chunks of the real world and put them on the screen. The reality is the inspiration but it will never transform itself to something that will look real on the screen. There's a whole selection process. And the only things that can work on the screen, basically, are story and character and what people can relate to.

MG: Is that where the musical genre comes in?

JH: You show the different sides of that



Julian Henriques

reality, the serious side and the fun side, in the same context. If you try to show just the serious side, if it had been just the babymother who didn't have an interest in music, it would have been a much more downbeat film. We could have shown her surviving, but it would have been quite a depressing film. And if it had just been the dancehall, just having a good time, perhaps it would have been a superficial film. So I wanted to try to find a form, to use film language that could hold both of those together.

MG: Was it difficult to get the film made?

JH: I own a production company with Parminder Vir, the producer of the film, and we had already made some documentaries together. It's really through her dedication and confidence in me that we were able to make the film. We went to the backers, initially with a 10-page treatment, and tried to get them to invest in the project, to get the script written, which we did. I did the writing over a period of several years. Channel Four came in with script development money. Three years later, they finally gave the project the green light, which made it possible for the production to obtain matched backing from the Arts Council Lottery. We had to fill out forms to prove the project's "social value." We didn't get any funding from outside Britain — we were turned down by the European Script Fund — but we didn't try hard to look for funding outside the UK. It's such a strongly British-based film, we had to do it from Britain.

MG: How has the film done commercially?

JH: The film was released in Britain on the 11th of September. It was a limited

release, 5 screens, and the main target was definitely, if you like, the 'core' audience. And the strategy was to build from that black audience to the young trendy audience. African Diaspora culture, African-rooted culture has, as we know, a huge appeal to the youth. So it's a big advantage that we have for the Western world. And pop culture has a huge market in the Arab world and the Far East. So there's sort of two halves, which is great. The other place where the film is being distributed is in the Caribbean, starting in Jamaica. That was the first sale that Channel Four made. One of the exciting things that has happened during the Toronto Film Festival is that we've got some very substantial interest for the American market. The African-American niche is something like 40 million people — it's huge. That would be a huge step out of the specialist market into a much wider one.

MG: Do you have a different strategy for reaching the wider market?

JH: Probably the best screening I've had so far was here in Toronto: every single joke, every single little trick was noticed and commented on by the audience. For Jamaican-American audiences, or British Jamaican audiences, it's great. But in terms of opening up the movie, or rather the world of the movie, some looping at the very least is going to need to be done. A lot of films are processed that way: they did a lot of work on *Trainspotting* just to open it up. You really have to do that at the beginning of the movie, to get people's ears into it, and then by the end of the movie you don't have to do nearly as much. The film has been released in England and Jamaica in the original form, which is fine. But it would be silly to go for a subtitled version now. Once you have subtitles on a film you limit the audience. I mean, that's just a fact.

MG: At the screening I attended at the Toronto Film Festival, you were asked by someone in the audience about your own cultural background. Did you feel that you were being challenged?

JH: I wasn't surprised by the question. People want to know who their guide is, in opening up this fresh new world. I could never make a film if it didn't come from inside me. It is me, it is my world, in many ways. Coming from our own specific places that we know and love is the best way to connect with the most people. You

have to have confidence that what interests you will interest other people. For the audience, it's a question of taking the risk of the first step toward something they don't already know. From that the rewards — discovering things and having a good time — can flow.

MG: What were your filmic influences?

JH: *The Harder They Come*, Hollywood and Bollywood musicals, *Strictly Ballroom* and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* — especially for the costumes! And *Romeo and Juliet*, because the poetry is used, like music, to get deeper into the feeling in a non-naturalistic way. I also had support from other filmmakers — Christopher Sheppard, Sally Potter, Isaac Julien — who shared their experiences.

MG: How do you see your work in relation to the Black British films of the late 80s and early 90s made by directors like Julien or John Akomfrah?

JH: We are friends, but I don't think our work is necessarily similar. It's especially important to mention that we each have our own unique style. My work is less obviously theoretical than the Black Audio Film Collective's, for instance. We all have our different ambitions. It's foolish to think that we all want to make the same kind of films. It's important that we have growing room.

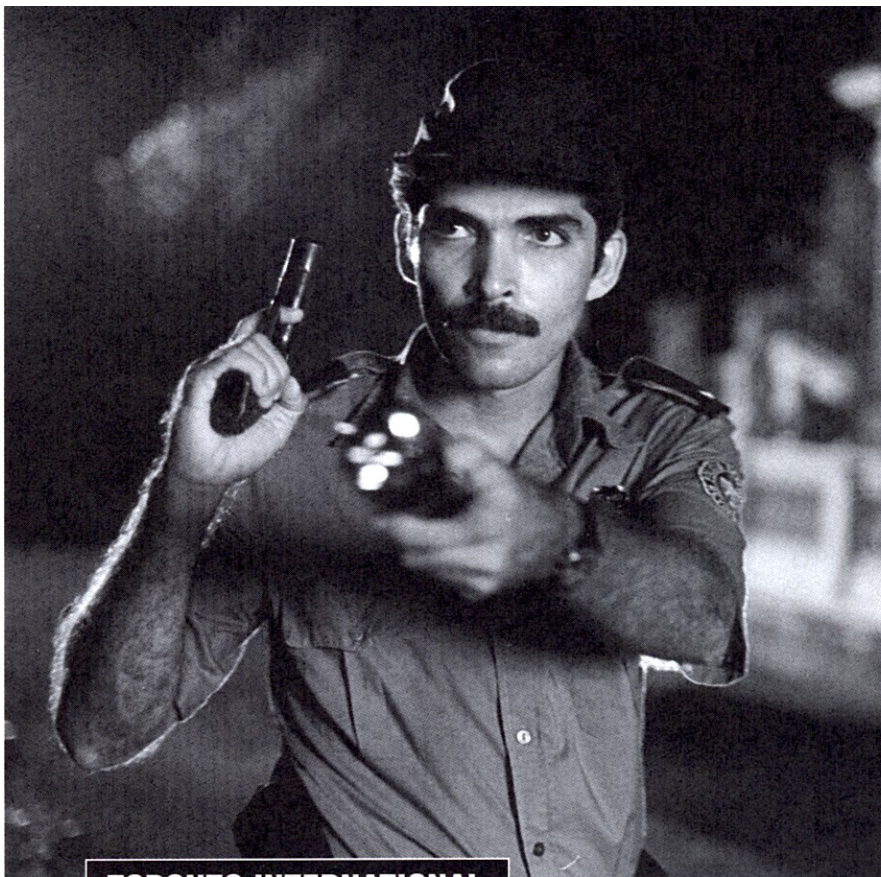
MG: Do you see your style as stemming from the conventions of the musical?

JH: *Babymother* is 'naturally' a musical: there's an organic reason for the musical form, because music is a part of that world. But the form of the musical is also an excellent means of dealing with a serious subject. Music helps avoid bathos, while taking the emotions further. I feel that through song you can go deeper and further. I don't understand why every film isn't a musical!

Marcy Goldberg is a critic, editor and translator living in Switzerland.

The above interview took place during the Toronto Film Festival in September 99. In September *Babymother* was released in Jamaica, to box-office success. It has also been shown in Trinidad and Barbados. Since then, *Babymother* has been sold to Independent Pictures in the US, who plan to release the film later this year.

For more information about *Babymother*, contact Formation Films, P.O. Box 3635, Harlesden, London NW10 5BW.



**TORONTO INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL**

Kleines Tropicana

Fantasy, Resistance and Third Cinema

by Scott Forsyth

The Toronto International Film festival annually provides an opportunity to see films from all over the world that are unlikely to make their way into commercial distribution. This includes films from most 'third world' countries, expressly political or difficult films and even films by celebrated filmmakers — the acceptable categories of consumption in the transnationally defined media industries are constantly narrowing.

Two challenging films screened in the 1998 Festival offered stimulating contributions to thinking about film and politics in contemporary political and economic circumstances. *Clouds*, from Argentina, is directed by Fernanda Solanas, maker of several acclaimed films including *Hour of the Furnaces*, the legendary "guerrilla" documentary from the 60s, and co-author of

one of the great manifestos of militant Third Cinema. *Kleines Tropicana* (Little Tropicana) is the only kind of film the Cuban Film Institute — a crucial institution in that Third Cinema — is able to make in its post-Cold War straitened economy, an international co-production, in this instance with German and Spanish investors. It is something like a screwball mystery, directed by Daniel Diaz Torres, best known for *Alicia in Wondertown*, a fabulistic satire of Cuban everyday life, temporarily banned in 1990 for its anti-bureaucratic invective.

Clouds is a stunning and magisterial work. Its apparently simple narrative concerns the fight for survival of a radical theatre group, faced with cultural cutbacks by the state and the deadening rhetoric of the market, a familiar tale in the 90s from

Toronto to Havana to Buenos Aires. The group stages its sparsely-attended shows — a fascinating swirl of the circus, vaudeville, the grotesque, the didactic — framed by huge canvas portraits of important Argentine directors of popular, radical and independent theatre from the thirties onwards, but also the looming images of Shakespeare, Chekhov, Ionesco, Garcia Lorca and many more. We follow the troupe's squabbles with bureaucrats and with themselves and with those who have given up the struggle. With this loose structure, Solanas constantly surprises the audience, moving from awesome and silent tableaux to painful personal confrontations and revelations, to passionate denunciations — finally Lear-like in their howling defiance and anger — from Max, the director.

The film, offered self-consciously as a series of metaphors for Argentina, makes its most memorable and fabulous statement in its slight re-imagining of the neo-liberal regime the troupe struggles against. Buenos Aires, in this fantasy crossed with social realist lesson, is literally under a cloud. It has been raining for over 1200 days straight. And everyone is going backwards. Despite the rhetoric of oppressive modernity, the people of the city are pictured walking backwards, with their umbrellas, in sweeping choreographed movements, or with the oldest of cinema tricks. It is a melancholy metaphor for post-dictatorship Argentina, where the normal is the absurd, where the Left has been defeated, integrated or demoralised, where individual self-advancement, if not prostitution, is the order of the day, where

what has triumphed is the global "market" and psuedo-democracy.

In an interview with Argentine professor Horacio Gonzalez, Solanas emphasises his film's rootedness in the national specificity of Argentine cultural politics. While that specificity makes the film difficult for spectators like me, it is clearly crucial to the possibility of difference and diversity against the homogenisation aggressively steamrolling the world's cultural marketplaces. Solanas is careful to point out how that national particularity can be generalised, referencing Jameson's discussion of the political use of national allegory in Third World cultural resistance. As strikingly, he also shows us that formal audacity and the traditions of the international avant-gardes remain living forces, when per-

Clouds





Clouds

haps our faith had faltered.

Solanas' film takes us through a dizzying set of provocative themes: the role of art in political struggle, the intricate relationship of radical film and theatre, the corrupting hegemony of the corporate media, the difficult imagining of the nation amidst the tyrannical imperatives of global capital, the contemporary redefinition of the state and its subservience to capital, the duplicity of liberalism and the personality of bureaucrats, the human costs of radical commitment, the pain of ageing and defeat. While the film is dark and despairing, it makes us feel the relevance of the national for global struggle and concludes with a defiant proclamation of the permanence of resistance in art, life and politics, that is finally exhilarating.

Kleines Tropicana is comic counterpoint to Solanas' profound meditations. It

is a madcap mystery constructed to bemuse and entertain. A Cuban cop wants to stimulate his life and career by solving the strange death of a German tourist, apparently hurled off a roof dressed in angel wings from a wild party. Was it murder? suicide? a drunken accident? The cop won't take anything too obvious for certain and we gradually begin to enter his narrative world where the most fantastic answers are the best. The tourist supposedly had a father who passed memorably through Havana in the 40s and fostered a cultural fixation in his Cuban-German progeny. Was he a Popular Front hero, a Nazi spy? Who really was the boy's mother? Who are all these other strange and stranger characters and what are they after? Oh, how those Germans practice their Cuban dance steps! And what evil nuclear experiments are those dwarf Nazi doctors plotting? We

gradually are lost in a parodic re-imagining of the film we are watching, with countless echoes of other films, a kind of Borgesian Maltese Falcon goes to Havana by way of Casablanca. What we are to believe of it all is hard to say.

As in many recent Cuban films, Diaz Torres combines the familiarity of genre with innovative twists and narration turning self-referentially around itself. We perhaps ponder how the clever concoction we have watched takes us through national specificity, not so much as ambition but as resiliently insulting and hilarious cultural stereotypes cum global commodities; it is the Tropicana after all, Cuba's most infamous site of sexual and faux-cultural tourism, that centres the tale's fantastic remembering. We might also notice that this first-third world fable has provided the necessary trans-continent narrative

for the investment demands of an international co-production with multiple national audiences to please. The film concludes with the quotidian concerns of the Cuban cop, imagining his work-a-day reality, striving for ways to live an authentic life in the Cuban everyday that Diaz Torres finds so simultaneously marvellous and mundane.

In both films, the relationship between fantasy and reality is painfully, enjoyably close. *Kleines Tropicana* shows us ways a significant director, indeed a significant national cinema, can negotiate in the difficult global terrain for socialist Cuba and for any cinema outside the Hollywood behemoth. *Clouds* re-kindles the passion and militancy so crucial to resistance and persistence. The complexities of contemporary cultural and political struggle doubtless requires strategies that can imagine and confront, undaunted, both the real and the fantastic.

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Kleines Tropicana



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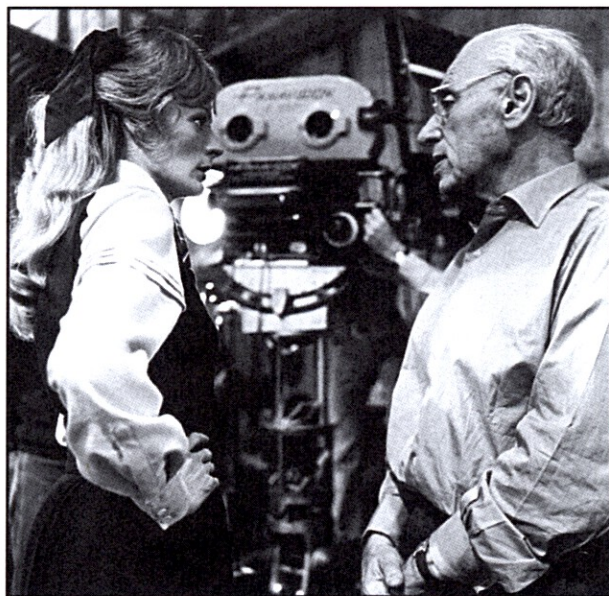
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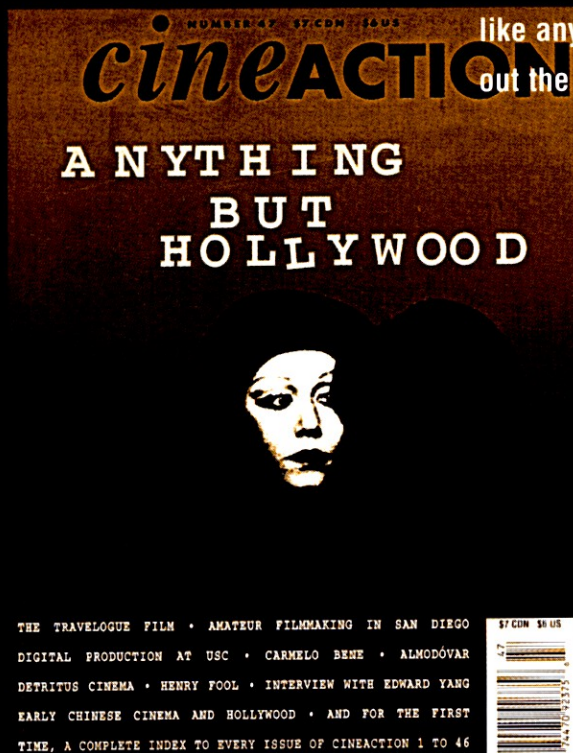
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